

# "But that Speaking Makes it So"

THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE IN THE FORMATION OF  
COMMUNITY

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I · The Beginning of the Story

Believing, with Max Weber, that man [and, presumably, woman] is an animal suspended in webs of significance [s/]he [her/]himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.

Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 5

The Comparative History of Ideas Program--or CHID, as it is more affectionately known--is an interdisciplinary program founded around notions of student-centered, problem-based education, as well as critical thinking. It has attempted, with varying degrees of success, to produce a coherent curriculum in the absence of broad faculty or administrative consensus. Instead of creating integral cohesion between individual classes, the program has sought to develop a dialogic narrative structure--an individual "myth" which contains the common elements necessary for community--around a disparate series of classes offered by a variety of departments. The difficulties of this dialogic narrative are multiple: avoiding reification, stasis, and hierarchically-based imposition, while at the same time allowing for a common narrative amongst a community of individualistic students, and dealing with a university structure which encourages stratification, accountability, and general "rules."

The Comparative History of Ideas Program is structured around groups of classes from other departments which students can select. The intent is to provide a structured series of challenging classes in order to meet university requirements while also allowing maximum student flexibility. Within this loose structure there is room for a great deal of choice, and students typically pursue a path which is highly individualistic. It is often possible to complete most of a CHID degree without ever taking a single class with another CHID student. Thus, the difficulties for a program which seeks to create a community atmosphere in this situation are apparent: just how does one create unity from all these individuals?

For me the solution to this difficulty is narrative. Shared, community-focused stories generate and maintain community. As I would like to see a stronger sense of community both within the Comparative History of Ideas Program and in the world in general, my concern in this thesis is with community and narrative. More specifically, I am interested in the intersection of community, pedagogy, and history in the Comparative History of Ideas Program at the University of Washington. This intersection revolves for me around an educational narrative which emphasizes the "gift" aspects of the university, an orientation which positions students as active members of a scholarly community. I believe it is through a retelling, a narrative (re)construction of the world, that this gift oriented community may come to be. Overall, I view narrative as the underlying thread which knits together our worlds, and I use a narrative exploration of the Comparative History of Ideas Program, gift, pedagogy, the literary canon, and even Dante's *Purgatorio* in order to demonstrate the ways in which a narrative exploration can productively mediate tensions and contradictions across both theoretical and temporal limits. In each case, I seek to further extend my theories of narrative in connection with a particular issue; in addition, my history of the Comparative Ideas Program provides one example a practical application of narrative to issues of community.

Of course, community is not something that can necessarily be observed and measured; it is instead a sense of connection which is felt emotionally. One can rationally describe the complex series of processes which serve to generate and maintain community--gift exchange, sacrifice, common interests, common concerns--but ultimately, community is more than its component pieces. One cannot form a community on purely rational grounds, though one may rationally construct a situation from which community emerges. Communities are formed from individuals, and notions of individuality and communality are thus inextricably intertwined. Though we often position them as exclusive opposites, their

interlocking natures necessarily preclude any kind of absolute separation. But it is true that movement towards individuation is a movement away from community and that the formation of community necessarily blurs the boundaries between individuals.

The world-views of individuals and the shared world-views of groups of individuals, as inextricably bound together as the individuals and communities themselves, provide actions and events with significance. These world-views, which in this thesis I variously liken to maps, texts, stories, and especially narratives--a map being analogous to a narrative at a particular point in time--are an integral part of what it means to be a human member of a community. In addition, the construction and subsequent reconstruction of either whole world-views or parts of world-views is continual, and this process contributes to the dynamic nature of existence.

## II · Towards a Narrative Theory of the Gift

Gifts bespeak relationships.

Lewis Hyde, *The Gift*, 69

One of the specific narrative methods of establishing community, of creating and maintaining shared world-views, is gift exchange. In contrast to the exchange of commodities, the exchange of gifts establishes enduring connections between people. "It is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people, while the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection" (Hyde 56). A gift, then, presented and represented within a narrative framework, works to establish a community within which more gifts are given and more narratives (re)constructed. It is this very circularity--for the "gift not only moves, it moves in a circle" (Hyde 11)--of enduring gift relationships which serves so well to generate and maintain community.

This circular path of gift to narrative to community and around again is my subject in this section, for it is in this narrative path that gift becomes a powerful force for establishing and continuing connections between people. This section thus provides an illustration of a narrative approach, as well as establishing a foundation for later exploration. First, in order to provide a framework for exploring gift, narrative, and community, I will discuss various theories of the gift. I will then begin my own investigation with the contradictions inherent in the idea of the perfect gift, and the way narrative can mediate these contradictions. Finally, I believe that narrative is a powerful force for dealing with contradictions without necessarily resolving them,

and by investigating the uses of narrative in Native American potlatches, I will demonstrate the ways in which a narrative exploration can serve as a productive mediator across both theoretical and temporal boundaries. Overall, my point is to explore narrative in relation to the gift and community, and to build a foundation for further narrative exploration. But before that, I will begin my foundational discussion with

### *Stories and Maps*

because "... without stories there is no articulation of experience. ... Stories give shape to lives. As people grow up, reach plateaus, or face crises, they often turn to stories to show them how to take the next step" (Christ 1). Through narrative we create a framework or map to represent the world and ourselves: "stories create a sense of self and world," write Stephen Crites and Michael Novak (Christ 3). "It is by being assigned to stories," Louis O. Mink writes, "that they [facts] become intelligible and increase understanding by going beyond 'What?' and 'When?' to 'How?' and 'Why?'" (546). Narratives help define and guide the way people act and interact. As Carol P. Christ writes:

When meeting new friends or lovers people reenact the ritual of telling stories. Why? Because they sense that the meaning of their lives is revealed in the stories they tell .... People reveal themselves in telling stories.

But stories also reveal the powers that provide orientation in people's lives. When people talk about books or movies that touched them, about people they have loved or wanted to emulate, they speak of that elusive sense of meaning, power, and value that roots their mundane stories in something deeper. This depth dimension of stories is crucial, for without it lives would seem empty, meaningless. (2)

"[M]an--let me offer you a definition--is the story telling animal," writes Graham Swift, "Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting markerbuoys and trail-signs of stories" (Swift 63). Thus, story-telling--"narrative (re)construction"--is an important element in our lives. It provides a sense of internal meaning as well as a means of representing ourselves and our actions to others.

But a story or narrative is not merely a personal construction. Rather, an individual is bound up in a series of symbolic or mythic representations--"man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (Geertz 5)--which serve to generate and maintain meaning. Together, these symbols and myths provide the structure for our world-views. They constitute a cohesive narrative of existence, a kind mental map (or text) which functions, in much the same way as a geographic map, as a guide to the terrain of life. From them we generate ideas, interact with people, deal with new situations, and perform other activities we would be unable to do without a framework in which to make decisions. But inevitably, the categorization which is involved in the process of map-formation leaves distortions or even blank spaces in the map, giant regions of unexplored or inaccurate territory.

And indeed, the world is not merely physical terrain approximated by a map and it is not merely represented through story. It is, in an important sense, constituted by maps and stories. We are so bound within our contexts, our mental maps, that we are unable to access any "true reality." As Terry Eagleton writes, "There are no 'brute' facts, independent of human meanings; there are no facts that we do not know about" (86). There is thus no means of separating our representations from that which they represent. Literature, like all discursive forms, is not just about our world, it is our world. Our world comes to be through language; the here-and-now is a narrative construct. Our worlds are thus constructed and reconstructed through narrative. Events may transpire beyond a narrative frame--we may physically fall off a cliff, for example--but this event is integrally connected to narrative in at least two ways. First, our falling off the cliff involves an historical context: we were out walking, found a cliff, went too near, and were blown off by a gust of wind. Falling off a cliff is not an isolated incident, in other words, but is rather connected to a series of other events. These connections constitute one narrative of the event, and are created as events transpire, and then often recreated by us subsequently. And our recreation of events is rarely identical from one moment to the next. Second, the repercussions beyond the event are narrative constructs as well: our friend who sees us fall tells a story, one which may change depending on who she tells; our own story (if we survive) is radically different. So, this second narrative construct is necessarily post-event: it is a representation.

Our ability to tell stories about--to *reconstruct*--past events which emphasize certain aspects of the action and de-emphasize others--or which even add or remove elements--is a powerful one. This

narrative reconstruction of historical events permits us to deal with ambiguity and potentially distressing aspects of an exchange (or other interactions or just other events). In the case of the gift, we can ignore--though not necessarily completely and absolutely forget as Jacques Derrida would have us do to achieve the perfect gift ("Gift" 14)--those elements of the exchange which do not serve our purposes and retell others in our own terms. This is a powerful tool, for it allows us, for example, both to emphasize the connectivity of a gift (if that is what we want) or de-emphasize it. Thus, I may seek to de-emphasize the commodity aspects of the gift of a meal (by keeping the check face-down, for example) in order to emphasize my role as a friend and consequently bolster community. On the other hand, I may sometimes wish to emphasize the commodity elements of a gift: there are times, for example, when I may feel that a gift will be perceived as too "forward," especially if it appears expensive (and thus a gift of more of my "being," at least in capitalist America), and I may add something like, "It was on sale" in explanation. This lessens the impact of the gift and diminishes its "weight," thus reducing connection which the gift-giving generates. It doesn't destroy it--it just emphasizes the commodity aspect, which in turn emphasizes our roles as individuals and lessens the communitarian elements of the gift exchange. Our reconstruction, whether of a gift exchange or of a fall from a cliff, allows us to maneuver through our complex society and to exercise some control over the meanings of our actions.

But note that this reconstruction is not necessarily total. I may or may not believe the reconstructed story of the gift exchange or the fall myself. I may even tell different stories to different people (even if I try to always tell the "truth"), depending on what I am trying to accomplish in a certain situation. I may not even be aware of what I am doing--one often does these things on "feel," choosing intuitively, without conscious thought, which elements to emphasize in which cases. There is little firm ground to stand on here, for it is difficult to capture the "truth" in these cases of reconstruction, especially since we tell ourselves stories about history as well as other people. Comprehension and understanding, prerequisites for judgments about truth, seem to hinge on finding stable content to examine. But is there a stable place "outside" all this narrative which allows us to judge accuracy and truth? I do not think there is one that we can inhabit: any place of stability is itself a construction of our minds and of language. Our stories shift; our memories are certainly not fixed. "Our minds are porous with forgetfulness," writes Jorge Luis Borges in his short story "The Aleph" (73). And our interpretation of events, even if the events do not change in our memory, may change drastically with new

information and in new situations.

### *Community Maps and Community Texts*

The same map and text analogy functions for groups as well as individuals: symbolic representations of reality, established for the sake of group cohesion and then translatable into group action, are inherently limited. Maps, like texts, are interpretable within the framework of a community. But, to draw on the work of Stanley Fish, this isn't a text in the sense meant by E.D. Hirsch and others: it isn't "an entity which always remains the same from one moment to the next" (Hirsch 46). However, continues Fish, this is a text "if one means by text the structure of meanings that is obvious and inescapable from whatever interpretive assumptions happen to be in force" (Fish vii). That is, the text which forms a group map--in other words, a culture--is not an entity which is always static, but it nevertheless exists as a presence in our worlds. But the "text" which constitutes a culture is even more fluid than the written text which is a book. This brings up an important point: an interpretation of a map is itself a map, and can be analyzed and treated as such. There is no fixed point at which interpretation ends.

But like an individual map, group maps are extremely important for coherent group action and for achieving that almost intangible goal of "a sense of community." A sense of community is an aesthetic feeling of belonging to a larger whole; a community is a group of individuals with that sense. One powerful method of establishing this sense is ritual: rituals "produce cultural [that is, communitarian] meaning by using symbols and symbolic behavior" (Podolefsky and Brown 252). In other words, rituals operate to generate and maintain shared stories. Often revolving around "stages in an ongoing process" and operating to "define a time or a place that is in some sense nonordinary" (252), rituals unite groups around common themes, common symbols, and common actions. Within these "nonordinary" spaces, ritual "allows for nonordinary behavior" (252). Ritual activity is not simply religious: even attending classes can become a ritual activity, as can final exams, and even regular discussions. Ritual can thus be used to generate and maintain maps. Thus, traditional notions, such as divisions between "Blacks" and "Whites" or "Serbs and Croats," may be useful fictions--rituals which establish a "map"--to create and maintain a sense of community. But this raises a question: does forming a community necessarily establish this kind of deeply-felt "us versus them" mentality? Or is it possible to establish fictions of community which can serve to flexibly define a group, definitions which can shift to allow members to join in pursuit of a common goal without necessarily positing an



oppositional element, without creating a firmly entrenched "Other"? The difficulty for both individual and group maps arises from the tendency of symbolic representations--and thus group boundaries--to become reified, assumed, and therefore inflexible.

### *The Gift*

"A gift, when it moves across the boundary, either stops being a gift or else abolishes the boundary" (Hyde 61). This capacity of gift exchange for erasing boundaries between individuals, for creating as well as maintaining group identities, is a powerful and life-affirming one. But gift is a neglected form of exchange in American society, for we are a society which glorifies individualism and freedom. As a result, gifts have taken second place to commodities, which "are associated with alienation and freedom" (Hyde 67). "In commodity exchange it's as if the buyer and the seller were both in plastic bags; there's none of the contact of gift exchange" (Hyde 10). At the same time, however, many Americans are also concerned with creating cohesive communities, and the pursuit of these two values, so often perceived as incompatible, creates tension and conflict.

Marcel Mauss' essay *The Gift*, the foundation of many later gift analyses, focuses on the gift in "archaic" societies in which, according to Mauss, group cohesion is maintained through gift exchange. "A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction," writes Mary Douglas in her foreword to *The Gift* (Mauss vii). Every gift creates a connection between people. That which is given contains a part of the giver: "Souls are mixed with things; things with souls" (Mauss 20). In effect, Mauss maintains, the person who accepts the present holds a part of the donor, forming a link between them. Ultimately, there are "three related obligations: the obligation to give, the obligation to accept, and the obligation to reciprocate" (Hyde xv). Every gift involves the expectation of a return gift and thus starts a pattern of giving without end. Once involved in the gift exchange, people are inextricably linked by common ties of reciprocity.

These ties of reciprocity generate and maintain community, but do so without ignoring the individual. From the evidence in Mauss' account, the emphasis in the system of gift exchange is on each person, because it is the individual's actions that determine the flow of gifts, not arbitrary laws that force action. There is, however, a certain obligatory element in the exchange: it is not possible to remain a part of these "archaic" societies without participating. As Mauss writes, "The obligation to reciprocate worthily is imperative" (42). Nevertheless, the stress is on the individual, not on abstract notions of commerce and exchange. The

very personal nature of the gift exchange, when practiced by a group of people, succeeds in forming ties between them, and thus the personal produces the communal.

According to Mauss, modern Western societies still retain remnants of a former system of gift exchange: "The morality and practice of exchanges in societies immediately preceding our own still retains important principles" of a gift economy (47). Our lives and our morality still retain the ideas of the gift, in which liberty and obligation commingle (65). "Things sold still have a soul" (66) despite the distinction our laws draw "between real rights and personal rights, things and persons" (47). In Provence, France, according to Mauss, everybody still brings an egg and other symbolic presents when a child is born (66). And during the Christmas season, there is still an expectation of reciprocity of cards and gifts. These and other examples, Mauss points out, illustrate that modern Western society still retains a system of gift exchange, if only in a haphazard and often unrecognized form.

Like Mauss, Lewis Hyde, in *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, seeks to reinvigorate the often neglected gift exchange within contemporary Western society. For him, gifts are the stuff of a positive sense of community, for "when gifts circulate within a group, their commerce leaves a series of interconnected relationships in its wake" (xiv). For Hyde, commodity exchange is "associated with alienation and freedom," while gifts are "associated with community and with being obliged to others" (67). He associates the gift with *eros* and the commodity with *logos*. "*Logos*-trade draws the boundary, *eros*-trade erases it" (61). The circulation of gifts "establishes a feeling-bond between two people" (56). Gifts, to Hyde, are transformative: accepting a gift involves integrating a new element into one's self, as the gift carries a fragment of an identity from giver to receiver (45). It is the living aspects of gifts, the carrying of a transformative identity from giver to receiver, which is crucial, for "it is not when a part of the self is inhibited and restrained, but when a part of the self is given away, that community appears" (92). He also recognizes that sometimes the connections established by gifts are unwanted: "Because gifts do have the power to join people together, there are many gifts that must be refused" (70).

There are a number of interlinking elements which invest gift exchange with the power to transform and connect people. Two of these are faithfulness and gratitude. "Faithfulness," writes Georg Simmel, "might be called the inertia of the soul. It keeps the soul on the path on which it started, even if the original occasion that led it onto it no longer exists" (380). Faithfulness allows for already established relationships to continue, even after the initial

impetus to their formation has passed. Thus the existence of a drive towards faithfulness in individuals means that people will tend to continue what has already begun, and that gift relationships will tend to endure once started. For this reason, accepting a gift, and thus establishing a relationship, is a decision which exceeds the temporal limits of the immediate gift exchange. It means at least accepting the possibility of a long-term relationship.

Similarly, gratitude also tends to bind people together beyond the immediate exchange. Simmel writes, "Gratitude, as it were, is the moral memory of mankind" (388). It is not discharged merely by returning a gift, but instead remains. Indeed, a gift relationship is characterized by a generalized sense of gratitude in which both partners feel grateful towards one another. In this way, like faithfulness, gratitude helps to continue relationships which have already begun: "It is an ideal bridge which the soul comes across again and again, so to speak, and which, upon provocations too slight to throw a *new* bridge to the other person, it uses to come closer to him" (388). For Simmel, faithfulness and gratitude are secondary modes. They operate only after relationships have begun, only after initial contact has been made. In this sense, they are both supplementary modes.

But the power of gifts is not derived exclusively from individual subjective causes, but also from interpersonal and cultural factors. Gifts inhabit the realm of the social, in which actions and events assume meaning in the context of larger social relations. "Gifts," writes Barry Schwartz, "are one of the ways that pictures others have of us in their minds are transmitted" (175). In sum, "gift-giving socializes and serves as a generator of identity (176). To draw on Mauss, they are a "total social phenomenon," encompassing religion, morality, the family, the economy, and more (Mauss 3). And gifts are exchanged between individuals with an historical relationship, both in the sense that the exchange itself has taken place through time and in the sense that it is historically situated in a cultural milieu rich in symbolic meaning. Our personal and communal ideas, rituals, values, and norms interact to produce a complex interplay of events which constitute any gift situation.

### *The Perfect Gift*

The ideology of the "perfect gift," described by James Carrier in his article "Gifts in a World of Commodities: The Ideology of the Perfect Gift in American Society," serves as a myth in American culture which reconciles--or at least mystifies and conceals--the tension between gift and commodity, community and individual. "The first element of the ideology is that the perfect gift is

priceless, that its material expression is immaterial. ... The second element of the ideology is that the perfect gift is free, unconstrained and unconstraining" (Carrier 23). Carrier writes,

This is a powerful ideology, one that is able to disembody objects, divest them of their material aspect and transmute them into pure, spontaneous expressions of being and love. Not only can it do away with the significance of the material nature of gifts, it can create a wholly new form of relationship, in which people can be related but independent, joined but separate, linked fundamentally but in no way bound or restricted by each other. We give the thing which is not, and so are joined but free. (Carrier 23)

Derrida writes that a true gift is the impossible, that less-than-perfect gifts participate in the economic circles and thus always return something, making them thus less than pure (Derrida 7). And yet we in America, at least, continue to believe in Carrier's "perfect gift," a gift divorced from the material world, given with no expectation of return. And we still give, and talk about giving, "gifts." So what are these things we pass between ourselves, then? What are these items which are not "pure" and yet still resist a characterization as commodity, as simply and only things? How can we believe in the pure, ideal, perfect gift, and yet still give these things which are not perfect gifts and yet which we still call gifts? And how can we reconcile, or at least deal with, our apparently conflicting desires for independence and community?

We resolve this paradox--[t]his contradiction between objects as commodities and objects as gifts [which] defines a contradiction" (Carrier 24)--by (re)constructing a narrative of an exchange in order to emphasize positive aspects and de-emphasize negative aspects of the event. As a result, we can construct a situation which serves an intended purpose--whether it be to emphasize or de-emphasize connection or individuality--without necessarily "actually" giving such a gift. We can choose to view our childhood with our parents, for example, as a gift which can never be fully repaid, or we can instead construe it as "merely our due." In many ways it doesn't matter how our childhood "actually" was--though of course this plays a role in how we choose to construe it. What matters instead is how we describe and position our childhood within the narratives of our lives. Or, as another example, when I give a gift I may emphasize the amount of time I took carefully matching the gift to the recipient. I may also put a great deal of

time into arranging the circumstances of the exchange—a surprise party, for example—in order to emphasize that this is a personal gift and not just a thing from the shop down the street. Carrier believes that Americans, faced with the contradiction of giving things which were originally purchased as commodities, often "act to appropriate the commodity, to stamp it with their identity and so convert it into a possession" (Carrier 25). We may thus thoughtfully attempt to match gift to recipient, look for "unique gifts," and carefully wrap a present in order to "help make objects more suited for use in gift relations" (Carrier 25).

Essentially, we resolve the paradox through symbolic manipulation. It is a kind of "*méconnaissance*" or "misrecognition" (Bourdieu 5), though rarely complete. Most often, we construct a narrative of gift exchange which masks the impure, commodified aspect of our gifts. Thus, for example, when a friend and I were in a restaurant treating another friend to a birthday meal, we covered the cash we had placed on the table, rather than having it lie in view. The money aspect felt wrong and the wrongness made us uncomfortable. After the fact, we choose to remember the gift of food and not the money which went into the purchase of that food. We are aware that this was in one sense a commodity exchange, and yet the story we tell ourselves and others about the event is that we "treated" our friend to lunch. We gave her a meal for her birthday.

And yet we still often say that we "bought" the meal—a clear indication of commodity exchange. We may even say that we "bought it for her." While we insulate ourselves from the actual exchange of commodities, we do not completely divorce ourselves from it. Indeed, at least in capitalist American culture, it is generally impossible to divorce ourselves from the commodity aspects of the gift, because it is nearly impossible to give a gift which was not, at one time, purchased. There is thus, in the end, a blurry line between commodity exchange and gift exchange. That is, since we can talk about gifts in terms of commodities without destroying their gift nature—even if it makes us uncomfortable in some ways—then there is clearly a certain overlap between the two. Like the difference between the individual and the community, a commodity and a gift are not absolutely separate. Each is inextricably bound up with the other.

These two factors (narrative reconstruction and the imperfect dichotomy between gift and commodity) are major factors in any exchange. We both conceal from ourselves and others the commodity aspect of our gifts—by hiding the money, by not letting the gift-recipient see the amount of the check, by emphasizing the gift aspect in conversation—and reveal our comfort with (or at least

resignation to) certain accepted norms of commodification of the gift through our actions and words.

*"Webs of Significance"*

In any society, generally accepted norms are violated. "It is important," write Judson Mills and Margaret Clark, "to remember that the fact that violations of norms occur does not disprove the existence of the norms" (39). They continue:

Norms guide behavior by specifying the kinds of responses that are expected and acceptable in particular situations, but to have any meaning norms must be defined separately from the behavior that actually occurs. Otherwise the norms could not be distinguished from the behavior. (39)

These norms are not merely generated and held within the individuals or within the particular relationship, but "are shared more generally by other persons" (39). Though norms are not necessarily rigid, they, alongside other aspects of culture, impact both the interactions and the players in the relationship. They provide the cultural fabric--the "webs of significance" (Geertz 5)--which give meaning to actions and events.

These "webs of significance" also provide a fertile field for the manipulation of symbolic meaning--and, in turn, the interpretation of that manipulation. This construction of signification occurs on several levels, some of which operate as the action is being performed and some of which operate after the action has been completed. The narrative of the action as it occurs--in other words, the perception of the event as it is occurring in the present moment--rather than afterwards, is a narrative construction. After the event has already occurred--that is, after we "have followed" it (to draw on Mink's article "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension")--we must *reconstruct* or *represent* it. A gift, for example, is thus presented; afterwards, we *represent* the event to ourselves and others.

In either case, there is more to an action than the action itself. The "thin description" (Geertz 7) is "what actually happened"--the thinnest description is the most "factual," the most "objective," and it eventually thins out to such an infinitesimal size that nothing is left. Perfect objectivity, perfect factuality, describes nothing--is nothing. A "thin description" may say: "He gave a white rose to Morgan." A "thicker description" might say: "He, out of a desire to clarify his relationship with Morgan, gave her a white rose,

signifying a desire only for friendship and not for romance, but Morgan misinterpreted the gesture, because any rose meant love to her, and thus continued to court him." Taking it to the extreme, the "thickest description" would theoretically involve infinite levels of signification, each sign telescoping into other signs in a dense and impossibly complex structure which would, in the end, convey nothing. But in-between these extremes are multiple folds of significant meanings. Geertz, drawing on Gilbert Ryle, writes:

But the point is that between what Ryle calls the "thin description" ... and the "thick description" ... lies the subject of ethnography: a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which ... [actions] are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not ... in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do .... (7)

It is within this "stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures" that a person acts, and in which a gift and a gift-event create, maintain, and participate in cultural and personal meanings.

This symbolic world through which a person moves is not an atemporal thing. A person's perspective on the world, though perceivable from the outside as a static "map," is more accurately analogous to a dynamic narrative. Narratives, unlike maps, necessarily involve a temporal element, for one of the defining features of a story is necessity of following it as it unfolds (Mink 545). Thus, while maps are a useful analogy to world views, they are a necessarily limited one. Pierre Bourdieu writes:

It is significant that "culture" is sometimes described as a *map*; it is the analogy which occurs to an outsider who has to find his way around in a foreign landscape and who compensates for his lack of practical mastery, the prerogative of the native, by the use of a model of all possible routes. (2)

Forgetting the temporal element in cultural models is to be trapped by what Bourdieu terms "*objectivist*" knowledge (3). To view the world as a narrative is to reintroduce this temporal element: exchange becomes an event situated within a cohesive narrative, and acts become not isolated but connected.

*The "Potlatch": Community Through Gift*

A situation of exchange is thus not simply an event which occurs, but is also (or is only, since we lack the ability to escape language and to access "what really happened") a narrative about that event. But what is it that we are seeking to construct? Why do gift narratives tend to establish community while commodity narratives do not? "To begin with," writes Hyde, "the giving of a gift tends to establish a relationship between the parties involved" (Hyde xiv), while commodity exchange is "correctly associated with the fragmentation of community and the suppression of liveliness, fertility, and social feeling" (Hyde 38). He continues: "It is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people, while the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection" (Hyde 56).

This use of gift structures to create community is strikingly evident in the accounts of Northwest Coast "potlatches." "The Northwest Coast potlatch," writes Sergai Kan, "particularly its Southern Kwakiutl version, has been a favorite subject of debate in North American anthropology" ("Tlingit potlatch" 192). The potlatch ritual, according to those in the Boasian tradition, is generally agreed to be (192)

an ostentatious and dramatic distribution of property by the holder of a fixed, ranked and named social position, to other position holders. The purpose is to validate the hereditary claim to the position and to live up to it by maintaining its relative glory and rank against the rivalrous claims of the others. (Codere 63)

According to Kan, "[t]hese scholars identified the crucial role of the potlatch in the sociocultural order 'as a formal procedure for social integration, its prime purpose being to identify publicly the membership of the group and to define the social status of the membership'" (192; Drucker and Heizer 8). These definitions generally apply to most Northwest Coast potlatches, according to Kan, but they also leave out some significant aspects (192).

A more symbolic approach to interpreting potlatch, originally favored by Mauss, deals with 'potlatch as a "total social phenomenon," which is simultaneously 'religious,' 'mythological,' 'economic,' 'jural,' and so forth' ("Tlingit potlatch" 193). Continuing in this symbolic vein, which has come to be strongly associated with "Geertzian 'symbolic anthropology,'" are other writers who deal with the symbolism of such things as food,



religion, names, gifts, and so on, as well as the interconnections between these things ("Tlingit potlatch" 193). One of the connecting elements which helps join the potlatch with "the total system of exchange between participating hosts and guests" ("Words" 47) is narrative--or "oratory" in Kan's terminology.

But potlatches are complex, and resist generalization to singular readings, "narrative" or otherwise. Both Kan and Jay Miller criticize many current models of potlatch as "reductionist" (Miller 38) for focusing only on a small number of aspects "of this multifaceted phenomenon" ("Tlingit potlatch" 194). However, as my focus in this thesis necessarily limits my ability to deal with the totality of potlatch, I will rely on others to discuss it in full, and instead will concentrate on the aspects of potlatch which emphasize its ability to generate community through gift and gift narrative.

One example of a potlatch which manifests all three of these aspects--gift, narrative, and community--occurred in 1987: the Tsimshian people of the village Kitsumkalum in British Columbia, Canada, conducted a "pole raising," in which the raising of two totem poles--"a massive undertaking" (McDonald 103)--coincided with a potlatch-style feast, which James McDonald identifies with the native term "*yaakw*." "One of the most general intentions for the ceremony," writes McDonald, "was to give expression to the meaning of being Tsimshian" (105)--in other words, to create community around a notion of Tsimshian identity.

In this effort, narrative becomes the mediating element which catalyzes the transition from a simple gift exchange to the formation of community. The general ceremony of the pole raising followed traditional patterns, but also integrated new elements which helped to deal with the contemporary situation in which the Tsimshian's found themselves (they are located in the modern industrialized nation of Canada, for instance). This ceremony, complete with a "master of ceremonies" (109) who served as the narrator, is an excellent example of a narrative construction which worked to transform the gifts and other rituals within the process into a lasting sense of community.

The entire ceremony itself was a structured gift situation, though gift was not its only aspect. The first part of the ritual was the pole raising, which planners "decided to make as spectacular as possible by raising both poles simultaneously and having a large feast" (108). One important aspect of gift situations is their personal nature, and this was apparent early on, as invitations were given to many people personally, often in a "formal and ceremonial manner" (108). The presence of guests--their return gift, in a sense,

for this honorable recognition by Kitsumkalum--serves to sanctify a claim, if they do not dispute it (108). During the pole raising ceremony, volunteers from among the assembled guests were asked to serve as pole carriers to move the poles to the correct location, and "their names were recorded on paper by the event coordinator in order to thank them later" (108). During critical stages of the ceremony, the master of ceremonies paused events in order to explain the significance of certain actions. For example, as the poles were being raised, the procedure paused in order "to allow the guests to hear the history of the community and of the poles, to understand the significance of the pole raising, and to voice any objections" (108).

After the poles were finally raised, invited guests moved to a new location, and the feast began. In addition to providing food for the guests--itself a kind of repayment for their attendance and recognition of the event--Kitsumkalum distributed a large pile of gifts to the guests "as a way of 'paying' the audience for witnessing the ceremonies and, thereby, for validating the themes" of the entire event (111). This notion of "paying" was intended as a translation of potlatch notions into contemporary language, for the contributors had no considerations of "[b]reaking even' in potlatch terms" (111). Instead, the gifts "were made very much along the lines of what Adams called 'investments in community relationships'" (111; Adams 4). The distribution of the gifts "recognized certain social categories" (112)--McDonald identifies four: "important people and others, men and women" (112)--and thus served to reinforce these social categories, as well as the connections between giver and receiver.

Overall, the potlatch and pole raising "was a case, not only of people acting within structured situations, but of people structuring the situations in which to act" (117). The construction of the potlatch narrative--the "cultural discourse" which generated the ritual--

regularized the community's cultural dispositions by shifting and harmonizing the cultural context of people's assumptions and practices, at least in so far as feasting was concerned, and by re-contextualizing social issues with Tsimshian values. As this process proceeded, meeting after meeting, the structure of the situation and of peoples' actions became more confidently 'Tsimshian.' Simultaneously, the discussions both shaped Kitsumkalum's

social world and produced an immediate adherence to that world by those discussing it and, by extension, because of the structure of the central [planning] committee, the community. (118)

But this process of construction did not stop with the completion of the potlatch itself. McDonald writes, drawing on Bourdieu, that the "correspondence between Tsimshian values and contemporary issues was not yet sufficiently 'natural' for it to sink into the realm of self-evident experiences which are taken for granted as assumptions that need not be discussed" (118). The ceremony, "was recreated over and over in memory and conversation" as the community attempted to integrate the values of the potlatch with the values of the dominant Canadian culture. This narrative reconstruction became "another step in the continual process that reproduces Kitsumkalum's social and cultural world" (118).

### *Wrapping up the Gift*

Whether it is in the Western tradition of the United States or the uneasy joining of native culture with Canadian tradition in British Columbia, in Mauss' "archaic societies," or even in the university environment, gift exchange is a powerful force for generating and maintaining community. But our commodity-oriented, individualistic society is in danger of severely neglecting those aspects of the gift which can contribute to a positive sense of community. If we are to generate and maintain a life-affirming society which values both the individual and the community, how can we mediate the contradictions and tensions which exist between and within commodities and gifts? I believe it is through narrative, through the common stories we tell about our world, through mass media and personal interaction, that we can reclaim the "gift" aspects of our culture.

Understanding and reclaiming the gift is possible only through story. Viewed in terms of an atemporal, objectified event, there is no apparent reason why, as Hyde says, "Gifts bespeak relationships" (69). In order to achieve an understanding of why a gift leads to the development of community, one must focus on the narrative of a gift exchange, the temporal movement through time which connects the action of yesterday with the response of today. It is narrative which lends the cohesion to gift relationships, for it is narrative which makes a gift a gift, because a gift narrative emphasizes connectedness rather than disassociation. There is not necessarily any inherent difference between gift and commodity, "but that speaking makes it so." And this is the power, and the danger, of narrative: the power to form, manipulate, and destroy

relationships and connections between people. It is a power which the people of Kitsumkalum manipulated to reinvigorate and "decolonialize" their culture, and it is a power which my friend and I manipulated when we covered the check to emphasize the gift aspect of the birthday-meal.

### III · On Narrative

Narrative is powerful force. The way in which one constructs something, envisions it, describes it, or tells about it has a large impact on its function and effect within one's culture. For instance, recognizing that in the South Pacific cultures investigated by Mauss in *The Gift*, presents are treated as living things, despite appearing to most Americans and Europeans as simply inert objects, Hyde writes, "The distinction--alive/inert--is not always useful, in fact, because even when a gift is not alive it is treated as if it were, and whatever we treat as living begins to take on life" (25). In other words, constructing a narrative or world-view in which gifts are alive results in a world in which gifts function, for all intents and purposes, as if they really are alive: "everything happens as if" they are actually living things.

But the power of narrative is not limited to gift exchange, for narrative is how we ourselves come to be as subjects in a culture, for "the subject itself is the effect of a production, caught in the mutually constitutive web of social practices, discourses and subjectivity; its reality is the tissue of social relations" (Henriques 117). In this model, Bronwyn Davies writes, "we can only ever speak ourselves or be spoken into existence within the terms of available discourses" (42). Stories, in her description of poststructuralist thought, "are the means by which events are interpreted, made tellable, or even livable. All stories are understood as fictions, such fictions providing the substance of lived reality" (43).

Thus, like an exchange of gifts, a novel, or even the literary canon, community is always a fictional construct. It doesn't exist as a separate entity "but that speaking makes it so." The creation of a narrative--the telling of a story--is a means of smoothing out the rough edges of existence, a means of transforming raw experience into the webs of significance which constitute culture. Indeed, narrative is such a basic component of culture, of humanity, that we never actually have access to "raw experience." Nothing exists for us "but that speaking makes it so," and it is this speaking which provides the coherent meaning in our lives, rather than leaving them a series of discontinuous, unrelated events.

This smoothing out of existence into a "comprehensible" (Mink 548-549) whole is evident, to utilize a literary example of

narrative's ability to establish a "fiction of flow," in Dante Alighieri's *Purgatorio*. Throughout the work, Dante the Pilgrim--as distinguished from Dante the Poet--encounters change, but only some of this change is disruptive. Thus, at the beginning of Canto ix, before his encounter with the Angel, Dante the Pilgrim's narrative pattern becomes incoherent and disrupted and he is forced to reconstruct, with the help of Virgil, a comprehensible narrative sequence in order to regain control. From Dante's perspective, he falls asleep in the company of Virgil and three others in a flowering glen: "I, by Adam's weight of flesh defeated, / was overcome by sleep, and sank to rest / across the grass on which we five were seated" (ix, 10-12). He then dreams of a golden eagle which descends from Heaven and then carries him "up as high as the Sphere of Fire" (ix, 30). When he awakens, scorched by the imaginary blaze, he is first dazed and then filled with confusion: "I sat up with a start; and as sleep fled / out of my face, I turned the deathly white / of one whose blood is turned to ice by dread" (ix, 40-42). His world has shifted dramatically and incomprehensibly; he lacks a narrative which allows for an explanation. His dream provides a kind of narrative, but it is not the kind of narrative upon which he is used to relying. It does not provide a rational explanation for his transport, for this experience of dream-envisioned travel is not, in his experience, a usual event. It is left to Virgil--whom John Ciardi terms "Human Reason" (Ciardi 64)--to produce a narrative around which Dante the Pilgrim can reconstruct a series of reasonable events. Virgil explains that Lucia, "a Lady" (ix, 55), came while Dante slept and carried him, with Virgil following, to the Gate of Purgatory (ix, 52-63). This account provides Dante the Pilgrim with a rational explanation which he readily latches onto, though it is completely unverified beyond itself: it is pure narrative. But the change within Dante is drastic: "As one who finds his doubt dispelled, sheds fear / and feels it change into a new confidence / as bit by bit he sees truth shine clear-- / so did I change" (ix, 63-66).

From our perspective as readers, this narrative (re)construction is even more complex, for we are guided by the narrative provided by Dante the Poet, which is seamless and comprehensible, while at the same time following Dante the Pilgrim through his confusion and incomprehension: for us as well it is (generally) not normal for movement to occur through dreams, but our distance from the event and the smooth narrative provided by Dante the Poet insulates us from disruption. As a result, we get to see both the dream of the Pilgrim and the reconstruction by Virgil as reasonable events, because in both cases we are provided with a smooth, comprehensible narrative by the Poet. There is never a time when we, as readers, must ourselves--except vicariously, through the

Pilgrim--reconstruct a narrative.

The narrative reconstruction, from Dante the Pilgrim's perspective, allows events to seem stable and comprehensible, even if they were once perceived as irrationally disrupted. Even if the later Dante is truly unable to experience the world in the same terms as the earlier Dante, the experience does not feel incommensurable and dichotomous for him after the reconstruction. That is, a fiction of flow has been established which follows a comprehensible narrative series. From the outside, we may feel that there is a radical dichotomy, but from within, the reconstructed fictional narrative masks this. But it is even more complicated, for, as readers, we draw our perceptions from Dante the Poet's narrative, which always flows unbroken. Unlike Dante the Pilgrim, we never experience the disruption, we only witness it.

This points to the difficulty when examining any historical account of ever escaping comprehensible narratives. Is it ever possible to escape narrative reconstruction and to inhabit disruption? Comprehension and understanding seem to hinge on finding stable content to examine. But is there such a stable place "outside" of all this narrative which allows us to judge, for example, whether something is incommensurable or not? Or does our very construction of a narrative of incommensurability generate continuity and thus destroy any access to "true" incommensurability? Will we thus always see history in our own image--or at least in our own terms?

But it is this very difficulty of escaping into disruption which provides narrative with much of its power, for even as we are unable to escape from narrative, we are always able to tell a new story (though of course we do not always have full control over it). Narrative thus allows for flexibility. And because one may both construct and reconstruct an event through narrative, one may utilize story as a mediating element between seemingly oppositional elements. Writing of the Holocaust and narrative, James Young says,

It is almost as if violent events--perceived as aberrations or ruptures in the cultural continuum--demand their retelling, their narration, back into traditions and structures they would otherwise defy. For upon entering narrative, violent events necessarily reenter the continuum, are totalized by it, and thus seem to lose their "violent" quality. (15)

"Articulation allows a slight gap to open between the feeling and the self, and that gap permits the freedom of both," writes Hyde, and this gap allows us the ability to live and grow in a world which rarely matches our expectations. Because of the gap, which comes to be through an articulation of actions into a narrative, tensions, such as those between gifts and commodities, can be mediated. Narrative thus allows, for example, the gift, which then never needs to be "perfect," to contribute to community. It also allows us to escape the constricting confines of gifts by emphasizing the commodity aspects of an exchange. We can manipulate a narrative of exchange in order to either increase or decrease our connections with others. Pursuing this notion, we can, for example, manipulate our narrative of education to shift its focus from commodity to gift.

For, writes Ruby Rohlich in an email on a Women's Studies discussion list called WMST-L, "The point is, a college education is now costing students and their parents so much money that it has become commodified." This commodification has become increasingly apparent at the University of Washington, where a business model of education has gained a significant following: students (customers) pay the University (the company) to receive a degree (the product) based on the teaching (also the product) of professors (senior employees) and Teaching Assistants (junior employees and customers themselves). One thus hears calls for "cost-cutting" and "re-engineering" the university and so on. Such a "school as factory" view leans toward a model of teaching which emphasizes lecture and "practical" majors which produce "productive" citizens, such as engineering, medicine, and so on. At its extreme, this leads to a view of students as empty vessels to be filled with the superior knowledge of professors--preferably in as short a time as possible, so as to maximize their productive capacities.

But such a commodity-oriented approach neglects the communitarian, gift-related elements which are also present in the university, and which many students desire. Even as they struggle to "get their money's worth" from the university, students complain of "feeling like a number," lost in the labyrinthine bureaucracy of the university. Much of this comes from a neglect of community, from a narrative of the university which describes students in terms of commodities, as depersonalized agents in a depersonalized and depersonalizing exchange of lifeless things.

To recreate the university in a new image requires us to tell a new story. In this case, an alternative narrative is clearly possible, and elements of such a narrative are already in place in the university system. Such things as grants and scholarships clearly inhabit the realm of the gift, though they are often positioned in terms of

"investment"--an attempt to move them out of the realm of the gift and into the realm of commodities. The structure of the university is also conducive to repositioning in terms of gift, for the tuition students pay is never transmitted directly from student to teacher, but instead travels circuitously through the bureaucracy. Such a system of "hidden" payment could easily permit the "misrecognition" of the monetary aspects of education, allowing students and faculty alike to see themselves as positioned in terms of gift, with faculty giving their time, energy, and knowledge and students returning likewise. But such a gift orientation necessarily requires students to return gifts other than commodities, and thus leads to pedagogical implications, for students who return the gift of academic inquiry to their teachers must necessarily be viewed and treated as valuable members of a scholarly community.

Recognizing that a narrative retelling provides a powerful force for creating images, for investing things with validity and force, it is possible now to move to create an historical narrative of the Comparative History of Ideas Program. Such a narrative can emphasize the community orientation of the program in the past, and provide the present and future participants with a story which provides meaning to their efforts within the program. In essence, this story is my return gift to the program for what I have learned through it; it is an attempt, in other words, to continue the circulation of the gift. So, having thus recognized the power of narrative, its ability to create and recreate reality, we can now attempt to practice the theories of this thesis and thus to tell a foundation narrative

#### IV · Of the Comparative History of Ideas Program

which began originally in 1977 with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Originally formed along with two other interdisciplinary "comparative" programs, the Comparative History of Religion and the Comparative History of Art, CHID has gone through a number of changes since its inception.

According to the first proposal to establish CHID as a degree-granting program, entitled "Request for a New Degree Program," its beginnings lay in a five-year, \$800,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Planning, however, had begun three years before that in a "subcommittee of the Humanities Council of the College of Arts and Sciences [at the University of Washington]" ("Request" 5). The intent of the grant request "was to reinvigorate undergraduate education in the liberal arts and the humanities" (5). NEH and the Humanities Council desired "a rigorously sound program which would draw on the particular strengths of the existing faculty" (5). The new program, designed specifically for the NEH grant, fulfilled a perceived need



in the humanities to "reintroduce more structured and interesting educational opportunities" in response to the lessening of requirements during the 1960s (5). CHID was designed not as a "return to the outdated structures of the 1950s," but rather as a partial solution to the problem of "less structured and less focused" degree programs in which "the coherence and value of a particular student's B.A. depends far more on the advising system [sic] and the student's whims than it does on programmatic requirements" (5).

Apart from this "Request for a New Degree Program," it is apparent from correspondence filed in the CHID office that Professor of History Rodney Kilcup served as the original chair of the program, until his replacement in 1979 by Hal Opperman, Professor of Art History, due to Professor Kilcup's unsuccessful tenure review. The new chair soon began the process of reorganization in the wake of Kilcup's departure, attempting, he writes, "To restructure the core courses in CHID so that the program will not be so completely dependent on one course and one person [namely, Prof. Kilcup and his HIST 207 class]."

In addition to recovering from the loss of Kilcup, Opperman began the process of restructuring the program in order to eventually invest it with separate degree-granting status. Up to this point, the program had been housed under General Studies, a broad and diffuse administrative home which provided little sense of belonging: "the General Studies degree is too broad and provides too little identity for the program," believed those involved in CHID. Opperman's efforts at restructuring followed in the wake of Kilcup's earlier unsuccessful efforts to achieve degree-granting status. After two review meetings of Kilcup's proposal, the Curricular Review Committee, chaired by Dr. Kermit L. Garlid, Professor of Engineering, had recommended that the University of Washington not create a new Bachelor of Arts program in the Comparative History of Ideas. Instead, the committee decided to "encourage the College of Arts and Sciences to explore alternative ways of providing such a program as an option in an existing degree granting unit." Their primary objections to the program were threefold. First, due to Kilcup's planned departure from the university in June of 1979, the committee worried about the "[a]dvising and administration of the program," thinking that "[w]ithout the strong support of an existing department, it may not be easy to find the kind of leadership that will be required" for success. Second, they were "surprised to find that there were no such courses [in science or social science] required in the curriculum, given" their impact on "mankind in the last two centuries." Third, "the lack of a core curriculum" of classes required of everyone was worrisome, as they had "reservations

about allowing students as much leeway as they would have in choosing courses."

Kilcup's original proposal for the creation of a new degree program in Comparative History of Ideas, which the Review Committee chose to reject, contains a number of elements common to later incarnations of the program. The original purpose articulated by the proposal is much the same as the current one: "to provide undergraduates with a broad and yet focused education in the liberal arts and to strengthen general instruction in the humanities at the University of Washington" ("Request" 1). In the words of the proposal,

The CHID Program provides a structured and coherent way to investigate the history and nature of intellectual life, a form of study which focuses on important issues which are often neglected because they fall on the border-lines of the specific domains of the established academic departments. The new program brings together faculty from a variety of departments who find intellectual history a significant kind of study in and of itself and who also find it important for scholarhsip [sic] within their own departmental field. By establishing an integrating focus for scholars with different professional training but similar questions and concerns the program contributes to the enrichment of humanistic studies on this campus.

Hal Opperman's correspondence of June 9th, 1980 suggests the state of the program at that time. He writes, "The program in the Comparative History of Ideas is developing nicely" ("Report on 1979-80" 1). His "conservative estimate" was that CHID currently had twenty active majors, five of which would graduate shortly. His difficulty maintaining records, reminiscent of problems the CHID office staff faces today, stemmed primarily from "the fact that many of our students do not actually declare CHID until late in their careers, and that several are also majoring in other programs where their primary records are maintained" (1). His difficulties, however, were also unique: "the previous chairman ran the program strictly from his own office and discouraged the maintenance of student records with the General Studies program, even to the point of taking with him all completed senior theses" (1).

Opperman's report to the Humanities Program on June 15, 1981, provides another glimpse at the state of the program: with twenty identified majors, "it is running at least as smoothly as a year ago with about the same strengths and weaknesses" ("Annual report" 1). At this time, the senior thesis requirement consisted of ten credits, five of CHID 491 and five of GEN ST 493, a situation that was causing "considerable confusion and unnecessary worry for students" (1). It was at this time as well that Professors Leroy Searle of English and Douglas Collins of Romance Languages and Literature were asked to join the Faculty Executive Committee.

In this same report Opperman comments on the need for a central identity for CHID students. He believed the program would be much stronger and healthier "if something a bit more generous in the way of resources were provided" (1). He writes, "The main problem is a lack of central identity (which is, of course, a problem with any truly interdisciplinary program)" (1). Students instead see the program as a "conglomeration of scattered contacts" (1). This is also the first year that examples of community-building appear in the records: a "Spring Quarter Get-Together" on Thursday, from 3:30-5:00pm in B-313 Padelford Hall, which at that time was the Honors Lounge. It wasn't a rousing success: "about eight students attended" of the twenty-five total identified in the program.

Opperman proposed several ideas for remedying the problem. The first involved placing all administrative duties in the hands of one staff person. Second, he felt that it was important that the efforts of the chair be rewarded more obviously. Third, he felt that grouping several small but successful interdisciplinary and comparative programs into a single administrative unit would be valuable. And finally, he felt that "a way must be found of bringing program faculty and students together" (2). That is, he sought a means of building community. One of his suggested approaches was to create "regular evening meetings twice a quarter to hear papers or discuss topics" (2). In other words, he wished to establish a kind of ritual event in which shared experiences--shared narratives--could lead to common understandings and connections between students and faculty.

Dr. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer's "Report on the Humanities Program at the University of Washington" provides another glimpse at the developing program. Mueller-Vollmer was an outside consultant brought to the University of Washington to report on the development of humanities programs such as CHID. He had also served as an outside consultant at CHID's inception in 1977, so he was familiar with the program and its goals. One of his major themes revolved around the importance of a "sense of coherency and identity among the students and faculty involved in the program" (Mueller-Vollmer 3). He felt that the work of Opperman

had succeeded in enhancing "the sense of identity among its participants" (3). He suggested, however, several additional steps towards improving community. The first was providing the chair with a small office to provide a central home for administrative concerns. Second, he felt a student lounge would provide a place "where they [students] could meet and establish contact with each other" (3). Noting that, at the time, the colloquium (then labeled CHID 490) was required of students in their senior year, he recognized that many CHID students lacked contact with other students in the major until then, and suggested that informal proseminars, regular meetings, or discussions would help to create connections within the program.

Opperman's report of February 19, 1982, suggests that this was a pivotal time for the still-young program. Most obviously, this was the last year of the NEH grant money, and thus the last year in which funding for the program was assured. In addition, the administration planned to end General Studies, which provided the base for CHID's degree, as it had not yet succeeded in becoming an independent degree-granting program. Finally, Opperman's three-year term as chair was coming to an end and a replacement needed to be found. The solution to these various problems played a major role in determining the future directions of the program.

Finding a home was the first task, and the CHID Program was in luck: Comparative Literature was willing to house the program, and the CHID Faculty Committee accepted the offer. An alternative possibility was to consolidate with the Honors Program, but this was rejected primarily because of curriculum incompatibilities. CHID thus became a track within the Department of Comparative Literature. Other changes were in order as well: Dr. John Toews, an intellectual historian who arrived at the University of Washington in September of 1979 from Columbia University, became the new chair, replacing Opperman. The faculty committee felt too, in recognition of student desires, that the senior thesis should be an optional component and that the colloquium should be moved to the junior year. All these changes persist to the present time.

The move to Comparative Literature marks the beginnings of the program's existence in its current form. Classes and degree-requirements have remained much the same since that time, and Toews remains as the current chair. But this is not to imply that the time between incorporating with Comparative Literature and finally becoming an autonomous degree-granting program was bereft of movement and change. For example, John Toews ended his three-year term as chair in 1985, and Jeffrey Peck of Germanics and Comparative Literature assumed the role. By 1987,

Toews had become the chair once again. And in 1984 Toews was awarded a fellowship by the John D. and Catherine MacArthur Foundation, a prestigious award that contributed to Toews' ability to nurture the program.

With the incorporation of Jim Clowes, then a graduate student in the History Department, as an organizational force, the CHID Program took on a new member who would play an instrumental role. In approximately 1991 Clowes became the *de facto* Program Director, though it was not until 1994 that he received official recognition. Working with Toews and the other members of the faculty committee, he began to shift the emphasis on program development away from creating formal structures and began instead to focus on informal community-building activities. It was this focus, believes Clowes today, that was crucial to the growth of the program.

In 1991 a visible monument to the efforts of both faculty and students emerged: a student-driven proposal to reorganize the program along new lines. Though it reflected the informal development which preceded it more than breaking new ground, "A Proposal for Program Development in the Comparative History of Ideas," nominally developed by the CHID Student Association, a group of students within the Comparative History of Ideas Program, nevertheless became the blueprint for the subsequent development of the Program. In it, the student group sought to provide:

1. Increased structure that would provide opportunities for student interaction, both academically and socially, yet would not infringe on the freedom embodied within the Program.
2. Added assistance and impetus both academically and administratively.
3. A greater awareness of the Program among students and Faculty at the University of Washington and beyond.  
("Proposal" ii)

In rest of this section, I will trace the impact of the ideas put forth in this proposal, examining how each of them was originally envisioned, as well as the status of each of them today. My purpose throughout this section is to demonstrate the explanatory power of tracing a narrative route of the development of ideas--of writing a history of CHID. In the end, I hope that my narrative will

demonstrate in practice the ideas of this thesis: namely, that through narrative one can draw a community together, and that a narrative which emphasizes gift over commodity can be especially effective at generating community. That is, I hope that my (admittedly limited) history of the Comparative History of Ideas Program will serve to bolster the already existing community within the program, something that has been a goal since its early days. The student proposal puts it in terms of "student interaction" (ii), but the desire is the same: the creation of community.

In addition to three broad goals, the proposal also suggests five main curriculum changes, most of which subsequently became part of the program. First, they sought to "establish an introductory CHID class" to serve "as an introduction to interdisciplinary studies" (1). This class, originally listed as CHID 200, is now CHID 110: "The Question of Human Nature."

"In the spring of 1992," writes Clowes, "I met with twelve students in a seminar to create a new course" ("Consideration" 1). From this seminar developed CHID 110, a class designed to introduce newer students to the approaches utilized in the Comparative History of Ideas Program, especially the notions of "context" and the ways in which "every person is shaped by his own particular environment" (2). The goal of CHID 110 was to consider the context in which ideas developed and actions were performed and to focus on the ways in which a person's world view, or "map," is formed from their context. "[O]ne map is not necessarily better than another," writes Clowes, "but rather is useful in certain situations and hopelessly flawed in others" (3). Finally, even as the course sought to develop tools of analysis and critical thinking for approaching the world and oneself, it also sought an escape from the eventual conclusions of an analysis of context: "Isn't everything made relative by its context?" commented one student. Recognizing this dilemma, Clowes introduced to CHID 110 the notion of "foundational myths" (7):

By "myth" I mean a story that serves as a core of the world view of a person or of a people. These myths then are used as the foundation in system building, [and] a logical system can be built around them. If one forgets--or denies their existence[--]then the assumption that one is "without illusion" only serves to protect the myth. Analysis then serves only to bolster and protect its assumptions. For one who denies the importance of analysis the outcome is similar--a complete dependence

on one's forming myth. On the other hand--if one is intent on always "demythologizing"[--]then one faces the alternate danger of having no foundation--no organizing frame." (7)

Too much focus on "foundational myths," Clowes tells me, leads to a place analogous to fascism: "a non-critical adherence to a faith position ... leads to the tyranny of those original assumptions or 'myths.'" On the other hand, I would add, too much analysis tends towards nihilism. The key is to establish instead a balanced dialectic between analysis and myth-making which utilizes both to check the extremes of each.

Since its initial codification in the student seminar, this introductory class has become a regular event in the CHID Program, and is the primary CHID class taught during each Autumn Quarter. It has served well as an introduction to the program and a large number of new CHID students first encounter the program through the class. Equally, however, the class serves as a reminder that not everyone is interested in a critical interdisciplinary approach, for a number of students react strongly against the class every year. Interestingly, though, a portion of these students who react negatively to the class eventually change their minds and join the program.

The CHID Student Association's proposal also recognized that Clowes was the only staff member at the time whose job was devoted specifically to CHID. Knowing that the program had grown to ninety-nine students, an unwieldy number for such a limited staff commitment, the proposal called for adding additional personnel and more clearly defining Clowes' role within the program. In addition, they recommended that CHID share office space with the Honors Program, a recommendation that eventually came to pass after CHID's move out of the Comparative Literature Department.

Finally, in the tradition of earlier commentators such as Opperman, the proposal recognized the difficulties of fostering social interaction in an interdisciplinary program which did "not offer regular courses where students' paths" could "intersect," they felt that there was "a need for additional opportunities to meet other CHID students outside of classes" ("Proposal" 7). They recommended establishing a student lounge to be shared with the Honors Program, as well as regular events that would bring students together, as a means of fostering community within the program.

All of these ideas within this student-driven proposal--indeed, even the existence of the proposal itself--reflect a major pedagogical orientation within the CHID program which believes in the abilities of undergraduate students to participate as valuable members of the academic community. Such a pedagogical orientation reinvests aspects of the gift into the teaching approach, emphasizing the ability of students to contribute to the learning of their teachers, and consequently allowing for the creation of community both within the classroom environment and without. CHID's focus on critical thinking is one element of a "liberatory pedagogy"--my language draws on the work of educational theorist Paulo Friere--which allows for the de-commodification of the classroom and the subsequent development of a community of equals. The pedagogical approach of the program draws strongly on a number of educational theories which stress critical thinking, a pursuit which, even as it moves to allow space for community, also tends towards analysis and the breaking down of community. The program as a whole, like CHID 110's drive to incorporate both myth and analysis, thus seeks to mediate the tensions between an emphasis on criticism and a focus on community.

#### V · Practice in Theory: Building a Pedagogical Foundation

The goals of the Comparative History of Ideas Program--self-reflexive critique, openness to multiple perspectives, respect for differing viewpoints, and student-centered, problem-based education--are usually applied to individual students. They same approaches can, however, be expanded and enlarged to create a self-reflexive *group* as well as *individual* identity--in a classroom, for example. But this project appears much more complex than an individual approach and looks to be fraught with the dangers of group dynamics: power relationships, individual personalities, as well as overlapping and perhaps conflictual group membership. The difficulty for an individual to achieve a flexible yet firm foundation for action becomes greater when a group of individuals must work together to form such a foundation in common. But, like other distinctions, such as those between inside and outside the university, or the personal and the political, a dichotomy between self and other, individual and group, becomes problematic on many levels. An individual identity is bound up in a never-ending series of constructed social relations, and it thus becomes infinitely difficult to distinguish individual ideas from social ones.

The ability to establish boundaries which are firm yet flexible requires the ability to analyze structures and to see their limitations, as well as the ability to accept the limits of analysis. The ability to pursue both analysis and aesthetics is not a talent that generally emerges without nurturing: it requires a focused attempt to think through issues, an attempt which the Comparative



History of Ideas attempts to foster. CHID's desire to cultivate a critical approach to the world has led the program to embrace "theory"--a rather controversial approach to teaching, especially in the undergraduate classroom. Many thinkers bemoan the presence of *theory* in the classroom, viewing theory as somehow divorced from reality, and insisting on the necessity of, at least at first, reading a text or learning new material without a theoretical perspective. That is, many believe, for example, that theory is either playing a role in destroying "traditional values" or that it has little practical application at all, except to confuse the "real issues." In any case, they wish to shield younger students from the supposedly stifling effects of theory.

Theory supposedly creates an environment which damages the ability of students to experience the text or to learn new material. It is esoteric "noise" which pollutes the virginous young student. This lingering perception--often disguised, equivocated, and modified--remains among a number of people, both "traditional" and not: theory, for them, is divorced from reality and merely serves to foster in students a jaded rejection of truth and an apathetic refusal to pursue the good. Thus E.D. Hirsch and Allan Bloom join some feminist writers in decrying an emphasis on theory in the classroom. But theory has been there all along--there are merely more theories being more widely discussed today. The "state of theory" (Richter 3) in which we now find ourselves is (like "politicization") an acknowledgment of difference, a reflection of the increased plurality of our universities, and especially a recognition of and a clue to the changing power relationships within the university and, by extension, since the university is part of the larger society, of society as a whole.

It is thus questionable whether the increasing tendency to question truth ("whose truth?") and the good ("good for whom?") is the *result* of theoretical writings, which are, after all, frequently abstruse and cryptic, aimed as they are at a specialized academic audience. It is entirely possible, and even likely given the increasingly complex world we live in, that *theory* is reflecting the world and not the other way around. But I think that there is a more complex relationship than mere reflection. The process is not just one of "economic-substructure-determines-social-superstructure," to borrow the terminology of Karl Marx. It moves beyond this to a more complex interaction between all the elements of a society: politics, raw materials, literature, relations of production, and so on. Our beliefs and theories both influence and are influenced by our economic situation; indeed, they are all bound up in a complex relational web without a center-point. Neither the chicken nor the egg comes first: the interlocking chain

is infinite.

Theory is not just the concern of academics writing impenetrable prose in specialized journals. Theory is everywhere and in everyone. "We are all always already theorists" ([Kecht] McCormick 114). Whenever I make a judgment, I am making a theoretical decision: to *like* a work of literature, for instance, is to make a decision informed by a variety of theoretical frameworks, whether I am aware of them or not. Even the organization of the university into departments--or the U.S. government into states--reflects a theoretical position. As Gerald Graff writes in "Taking Cover in Coverage":

In deciding to call ourselves departments of English, French, and German--rather than of literature, cultural studies, or something else--and in subdividing these national units into periods and genres, we have already made significant theoretical choices. But we do not see these choices as choices, much less as theoretical ones, because the categories that mark them--English, eighteenth-century, poetry, novel--operate as administrative conveniences and eventually as facts of nature that we can take for granted. ([Cain] "Coverage" 6).

One of the key points here is that, while we are all theorists, the theories we operate by are so taken for granted that we are usually not aware of them. Our discourse becomes *theoretical* only when we begin to examine the theories and assumptions which undergird our judgments, categorizations, and structures: theory is "a name for the questions which necessarily arise when principles and concepts once taken for granted have become matters of controversy" ([Kecht 114] *Criticism* 9). "There is nothing mysterious about it," writes David Richter. He continues:

Two teenagers arguing about whether one of their teachers is open-minded or wishy-washy, or about whether it is a band's material or performance technique that makes it so great, can quickly get to the edge of some region of theory, where fundamental questions about values and quality, means and ends, public and private experience are raised. (8)

We fall into a "state of theory" (3) only when this theoretical

discourse rises to such a degree that no one can safely ignore the theoretical underpinnings of their judgments.

The academy today, and perhaps especially the Comparative History of Ideas Program, seems firmly in the grip of Richter's "state of theory." According to the widely-told story, this is in marked contrast to times past when the more homogenous university environment allowed for greater common understanding and shared assumptions. But whatever the situation in the past, some writers have resisted this current state of theory, while others have embraced it. Gerald Graff, drawing heavily on Marxist educational theorist Paulo Friere in his book *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*, "emphasizes the need to make the conflicts that have racked and riven higher education the *basis* for a coherent curriculum" (Cain ix). For Graff, the conflicts within the academy appear unsolvable and the state of theory therefore permanent:

[Graff] stresses that reform will not be achieved by demanding that it serve one faction in the culture wars at the expense of others. ... As James Davison Hunter has noted, "the battles in the ivory tower" are connected to battles about traditions and beliefs in the culture as a whole. The representatives of each side fervently insist that they alone uphold the true principles that others have betrayed or surrendered in favor of political agendas. The debate, Hunter observes, thus "has an interminable character" (220). (Cain x-xi)

Graff's idea is to transform the struggle from a divisive debate to the core of a new curriculum, one "built upon the values of strong democracy and open, informed exchange" (Cain xi).

Such a curriculum must be theoretically aware and thus self-critical, both key elements in CHID's educational approach. Part of the importance in this for Graff is that the method avoids the "banking concept of education [which is] an act of depositing in which students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor..." ([Slattery 199]Friere 64). Friere "contends that those committed to empowerment and liberation must reject" this concept (Slattery 199). The "banking" model of education "suggests that there is a body of material 'out there'; it is known to the teacher and unknown to the student; it can be taught and presumably 'mastered'" ([Kecht]McCormick 115). Friere and Graff both advocate what Friere terms "problem-posing

education": "problem posing education, responding to the essence of consciousness (intentionality), rejects communiqués and embodies communication. Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transfers of information" ([Slatt 199]Friere 66). This is a more "dialogic" classroom, where "[t]he teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students" ([Kecht 115]Friere 67).

Others disagree about basing the curriculum around conflict, arguing instead that a common currency of "cultural literacy" is necessary for our society to function effectively as a community. Thus, Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* has advocated teaching the "Great Books" and, similarly, E.D. Hirsch in *Cultural Literacy* has advocated the maintenance of "mainstream" cultural references in the name of shared cultural norms ([Kecht]Schilb 48). Hirsch's book even includes an appendix entitled "What Literate Americans Know," which contains 60-some pages illustrating "the character and range of the knowledge literate Americans tend to share" (Hirsch 146). In justification of this, Hirsch writes, "Only by accumulating shared symbols, and the shared information that the symbols represent, can we learn to communicate effectively with one another in our national community" (Hirsch xvii).

In a course investigating these writers and their relationship to their opponents, John Schilb found many of his students in agreement with Bloom and Hirsch:

...they embraced the osmotic theory of education, assuming students can and should acquire knowledge merely from exposure to certain hallowed texts. They agreed with Bloom that students must simply let the "Great Books" speak to them, as if various mediating forces did not affect how various readers construe texts. They assented to Hirsch's "building block" model of the mind, wherein the learner merely accumulates one item of culture after another... (Schilb 48)

These anti-theoretical models generally deprecate theory in favor of "exposure to certain hallowed texts" (48), concealing the theoretical underpinnings that informs their perspective and neglecting the degree of difference within the classroom and larger society in favor of a homogenized, "certified" (49), and presumably depoliticized and unproblematic transmittal of

knowledge from teacher to student.

The lack of pedagogical reflection in this anti-theory perspective bothers Schilb, who believes it neglects to consider the ways in which "different students actually learn" (48). Though Hirsch takes note of the increasing fragmentation of American society and proposes a model of "cultural literacy" as the solution, he fails to consider how this very heterogeneity impacts the learning processes of students. The "Great Books" are neither transhistorical nor transcultural, as anthropologist Laura Bohannan discovered when she attempted to explain Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to the Tiv in West Africa. Before setting out, she had protested that "human nature is pretty much the same the whole world over; at least the general plot of the greater tragedies would always be clear--everywhere..." ([Podolefsky]Bohannan 139). But by the end of her narrative both we--and she--have discovered that the Tiv have a very different interpretation of the story. They "become convinced," for example, "that Cladius and Gertrude had behaved in the best possible manner," thus negating one of the main elements of the story. Indeed, by the end, the Tiv elders have completely reinterpreted the story from their perspective, and tell Bohannan:

Sometime ... you must tell us some more stories of your country. We, who are elders, will instruct you in their true meaning, so that when you return to your own land your elders will see that you have not been sitting in the bush, but among those who know things and who have taught you wisdom. (144)

While this is a rather extreme example, it does illustrate some of the difficulties of allowing the texts to "speak for themselves" in a diverse society. As the CHID Program emphasizes, one simply cannot assume the existence of commonality, nor can one simply expect community to form automatically around the "Great Books" of Western civilization. Community formation has entered a "state of theory." As Graff writes in "Disliking Books at an Early Age," he lacked the skill to find meaning within texts or to discuss them with others. Becoming theoretically aware was, for him, the route to an appreciation of literature and finally membership in the academic community.

The traditional approach in which "a good book 'essentially teaches itself'" ([Richter]"Disliking" 41), neglects what to Graff "seems so obvious as to be hardly worth restating": "In teaching any text, one necessarily teaches an interpretation of it" (42). For

Graff,

Much of the appeal of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* lies in its eloquent restatement of the standard story, with its reassuringly simple view of reading and teaching: "a liberal education means reading certain generally recognized classic texts, just reading them, letting them dictate what the questions are and the method of approaching them--not forcing them into categories we make up, not treating them as historical products, but trying to read them as their authors wished them to be read." (41)

In response, the question raised by Graff is simple: if "anyone ever 'just' reads a book the way Bloom describes" (41)? His answer is clearly "no." Instead, every reader--and every teacher, and every student--inevitably brings with them interpretive strategies and a theoretical background, whether they are aware of them or not. No one "just" reads. And "[i]t follows that what literature teachers teach is not literature but criticism, or literature as it is filtered through a grid of analysis, interpretation, and theory" (42). From the pedagogical perspective of the Comparative History of Ideas Program, it is clear that in order to participate in the literary discourse, which is inevitably a theoretical discourse even at the most basic levels, students must learn "intellectualspeak" (42). "Intellectualspeak" is the "foreign languages of intellectual culture" ("Voices" 25), a language of literature many students have no familiarity with, whether it is used by Allan Bloom or Jacques Derrida. To rely on a kind of "osmosis" ("Disliking" 42) instead of teaching theorizing is to neglect the real needs of real students. Nevertheless, the *goals* of Hirsch and Bloom are communitarian: essentially, the establishment of a common currency of "cultural literacy" in which everyone shares.

This is in marked contrast to much postmodern theory, which, instead of creating similarities, revels in difference. Its generally articulated goal of subverting "dominant paradigms" and revealing the bases of power is in marked contrast to the goals of humanists such as Bloom and Hirsch. Marxist theorist Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, however, in "Theory as Resistance" indicts much poststructuralist theory for its maintenance of the status quo, arguing that its methods of pastiche, deconstruction, and laughter serve to augment and disguise the established political structures rather than to subvert it. For Zavarzadeh, "[p]oststructuralist pedagogy/theory ... is the most recent updating of the processes and discourses through

which the dominant ideology is reproduced" ([Kecht]Zavarzadeh 29). Like "familiar humanist pedagogy," "poststructuralist pedagogy removes the 'walls' (the traces of the political) [from the classroom] by offering textuality as a panhistorical truth, which is considered to be beyond ideology just as is the 'truth' produced in humanist versions of bourgeois pedagogy" (29). While it offers the ability to read the classroom itself as a text, most poststructuralist theory does not do so. Instead it positions meaning and knowledge "as a self-referential web of textuality," denying the "reality of the power/knowledge complex" (Kecht 13). This produces the appearance of disinterested knowledge free from the cultural, historical, and political situatedness in which instruction takes place (13). Schilb, too, indicts much poststructuralist theory for failing "to probe how traditional teaching constructs the *student* as subject" (Schilb 50). Zavarzadeh's proposal of a "radical pedagogy" (Kecht 12), presented in opposition to poststructural teaching methods and other forms of "hegemonic pedagogy" (Kecht 12), is clearly in line with many other educational theorists. It posits a necessary relation between the classroom and the world, positioning students, teachers, and the classroom itself within that world, and enabling students to "recognize their power to criticize and even resist hegemonic codes" (Kecht 13).

One of the main problems with poststructuralists' approaches to the classroom for both Zavarzadeh and Schilb is their continuance of the authorial voice within the classroom, a continuance CHID is often at pains to avoid. Zavarzadeh critiques the theoretical play with textuality which ignores the interplay of gender, race, and class within the classroom. In addition, Schilb identifies hierarchical teaching methods which impose theoretical frameworks upon the students. However emancipatory the *content* of poststructuralist positions, the *method* of imparting them returns to a traditional format with the teacher as the centered authority in the classroom. For example, critiquing Jasper Neel's essay "Plot, Character, or Theme? *Lear* and the Teacher," Schilb writes,

Because "students" are mentioned only as the passive objects of "forcing," and because the essay has barely referred beforehand to what *they* might do in the classroom, Neel implies that the teacher is the sole initiator of learning, being the disseminator of a particular critical methodology. (Schilb 62)

He continues in his own article "Poststructuralism, Politics, and Pedagogy" to critique a number of other poststructuralists for similar pedagogical styles, despite their avowed interest in

exposing structures of power and allowing multiple interpretations of texts. The disconnection between theory and practice seems rampant.

Theoretical discourse in poststructuralism here stops when it comes to pedagogical practice. That is, these poststructuralist authors, while they may quibble over issues of textual interpretation to the extent that little can be taken for granted, are not quibbling over issues of pedagogical practice. Writers such as Zavarzadeh, Schilb, and Graff, however, are seeking to extend theoretical discourse to embrace pedagogy, and I believe this extension is at the heart of the Comparative History of Ideas Program, which always seeks to ask critique pedagogy even as it necessarily utilizes various pedagogical approaches. As a result, assumptions about the authority of a teacher are no longer taken for granted. The method employed, not merely the content taught, have entered a "state of theory" and become open for debate. No longer is it possible for a teacher to unquestionably impose authority upon a group of students; the possibility now exists for situations in which the teacher becomes decentered and community formation becomes a matter of group consensus--group story telling--rather than a matter of imposition. The process has always been complex, but without a theoretical interrogation, the dynamics of the process would remain unquestioned and unexamined.

While productive and liberating in a number of ways, theoretical discourse makes the formation of community problematic. Since community-formation generally relies upon shared myth--common goals, feelings, culture--what does one do when education's goal revolves around questioning foundational assumptions? How can a group create their own story and choose to believe in it, especially when they are trained to question everything? It becomes easy to deconstruct mythical notions to the point of their destruction, a cultural fragmentation keenly felt by conservative writers such as Hirsch. Many postmodern writers embrace this fragmentation on an individual level, but they often neglect the difficulties of forming a community around a critical myth trained continually upon itself.

Theories of feminist pedagogy attempt to deal with this situation collaboratively, as a community, rather than emphasizing the disconnected and independent subject constructed by more "phallogentric" theories which emphasize rationality and objectivity. Though the theories differ, Frances Maher summarizes some of their main elements in "Classroom Pedagogy and the New Scholarship on Women," writing that



a pedagogy appropriate for voicing and exploring the hitherto unexpressed perspectives of women must be collaborative, cooperative, and interactive. It draws on a rich tradition going back to Paulo Friere, John Dewey, and even Socrates, of involving students in constructing and evaluating their own education. It assumes that each student has legitimate rights and potential contributions to the subject-matter. Its goal is to enable students to draw on their personal and intellectual experiences to build a satisfying version of the subject, one that they can use productively in their own lives. Its techniques involve students in the assessment and production, as well as the absorption of the material. The teacher is a major contributor, a creator of structure and a delineator of ideals, but not the sole authority. ([Kecht 51]30)

Theorists of feminist pedagogy share Friere's condemnation of the "banking model of education," emphasizing "how such practices often reproduce patterns of domination, even when the content is supposed to liberate" ([Kecht]Schilb 52). In this alternative to conservative approaches emphasizing "Great Books" and leftist ones which set out to remedy the social blindness of their students, "students do not revel in sheer relativism (the conservatives' fear) or false consciousness (the leftists' fear)" (52). In the approach Maher calls for, students and teachers collaborate both to investigate the subject matter and to assess the "conditions and procedures of their inquiry--struggling to understand what makes for truly democratic relations of knowledge, praxis, and power not only in the classroom but in the larger world" (52). In feminist pedagogy, the classroom is not completely fractured into discrete individuals, despite its critical focus, but is rather a place of communal investigation and shared experience.

For Graff, whose "conflictual" pedagogy shares many of the elements of feminist pedagogy, the only route to coherence and thus to community is to concentrate on *curriculum* and not *classrooms*. That is, in order to avoid a fractured situation in which expectations and assumptions differ from class to class, it is necessary to focus curriculum around shared goals. The "shared myth" of "teaching the conflicts" thus becomes a community-forming activity in which students can begin to feel a part of the

academic community.

Drawing on Piage's structure of developmental stages through which a student passes, I would extend his 3-tiered divisions to encompass these theories. Instead of a hierarchical series of developmental stages, however, I view the divisions in terms of a Hegelian dialectic, in which community and heterogeneity, content and form, interrelate within and between pedagogical theories. Nevertheless, I would identify the first stage, in which the emphasis is upon the student as a "vessel" needing to be filled with content, with Hirsch and Bloom's notion of achieving a common culture through discrete blocks of knowledge. The second stage finds students in the throgs of relativity: every idea is seen as equally valid, and there is no method of distinguishing between them. I would identify this with the poststructuralist approaches to pedagogy critiqued by Zavarzadeh and Schilb, which focus on form over content and which delight in deconstructing schema. This approach rejects community in favor of unending heterogeneity. Finally, the third stage of development for Piage is one in which students can see the validity in multiple perspectives but are still able to distinguish between them and to apply the most appropriate one to the most appropriate case. For me, this is the synthesis of the two previous stages, and I identify it with the emphasis in feminist pedagogy upon community-oriented evaluating of the content taught. That is, it is not merely a question of the professor deciding what is important, but instead involves the participation of the entire classroom. Feminist pedagogy recognizes both the importance of content and the situatedness of that content. Graff's conflict pedagogy, with its recognition of disagreement without a dissolution into extreme relativity and emphasis upon coherent curriculum, also seems to fit this stage.

#### VI · Theory in Practice: The Current State of the CHID Program

Because a coherent curriculum is difficult to achieve in the absence of large-scale faculty and administrative consensus, the CHID Program has focused on creating a structured approach to disparate classes that masquerades as a coherent curriculum. But while Graff wishes to have instructors working to explicitly generate connections, in the model followed by the CHID Program, it is students, working either alone or in conjunction with advisers and other students, who generate a cohesive narrative about their school experiences. While the program was originally structured to provide a partial solution to the problem of "less structured and less focused" degree programs in which "the coherence and value of a particular student's B.A. depends far more on the advising sytem [sic] and the student's whims than it does on programmatic requirements" ("Request" 5), with the passage of time CHID as come to strongly rely on the dedication

of individual students and their advisers to provide structure, rather than on the explicit structuring of the program itself.

Thus, the approach to creating a cohesive CHID curriculum is bound up with issues of community, for it is generally through interactions with others that CHID students perceive their education as "holding together" as a whole. Of course, many CHID students reject the community-oriented approach and choose to work alone, and a number of these students succeed to create coherence for themselves. But numerous students within the CHID Program, especially those who have not become involved with other CHID students, express a sense of disconnection, often feeling as if they are simply fulfilling requirements by attending classes instead of growing, achieving, and excelling.

The Comparative History of Ideas Office plays a major role in facilitating community within the program, as well as encouraging students to create a coherent curriculum for themselves. The office serves a central locus of identity for the program, allowing students to easily connect with the CHID administration by simply dropping by. Indeed, a major goal of the program is to facilitate "simply dropping by" and in other ways to avoid the hierarchical structures of a traditional department through a number of means, such as using Peer Advisers, providing numerous open hours for students to be advised without an appointment, publishing a quarterly newsletter which seeks to keep majors informed of developments within the program, and encouraging students to become actively involved in the program.

Peer Advisers are a key component in the program's attempts to establish connections between students and the administration of the program. By utilizing majors within the program as staff who run the program, there is a much greater sense that students have a major voice in the direction of the program. In addition, because these student advisers are peers of the students within the program, and not tenured academics or permanent staff, they are much less intimidating and much more open to student-driven change. That is, both because they are on the same level as other majors and because they do not have as much time committed to their job at the university, being temporary residents only, it is much easier for them to change the way things are done. In many ways the office is reinvented every time a new Peer Adviser joins the group, because little is formalized within the office; much depends upon the particular desires and strengths of particular Peer Advisers. Of course, this can also be a burden, for the flexibility offered by temporary student workers also allows for the possibility of forgetting ways of approaching problems that work. If the office is reinvented and reinvigorated every time a new Peer Adviser

becomes involved, then that means that both what works well and what doesn't work well are affected. Thus, this attempt to create a structured yet flexible community is both strengthened and weakened by its volatile and ever-shifting composition.

In many ways, the Peer Advisers, as well as the other members of the CHID staff, seek to create a common narrative about the program to bind its members together and make them feel a part of a larger whole. For exactly this reason, new majors are required to follow several steps before becoming CHID majors. These formalized steps serve both the practical purpose of making sure all required paperwork is in order, as well as the more amorphous purpose of providing a kind of mini-initiation ritual for new majors. One of these steps is a reflection paper, in which students write about their previous educational experiences and their goals for the future; essentially, they are creating a short narrative to provide themselves with a grounding as they enter the program. Most important for new majors, however, is their "intake interview" with a CHID adviser. This initial advising session is intended especially for the creation of a cohesive educational narrative. Students meet with an adviser and discuss their reflections paper, as well as what classes might meet their goals, which instructors share similar interests, and so on. The point is to provide the student with an individualized structure to lend coherence to their time as a student in the program.

Currently, and even more so in the past, the largest denomination of "common currency"--Hirsch's "cultural literacy"--of the CHID program is generated through the Junior Colloquium. CHID 390: "The Interpretation of Texts and Cultures" provides many students with their first in-depth encounter with other CHID students. As a result, CHID students tend to "emerge" as active members of the program only after they have taken the course. Many also feel that the books and concepts dealt with in the class provide the foundation for many of their future intellectual pursuits. In many ways, CHID 390 provides the "foundational myths" of the CHID program, though these myths are presented less as a story and more as a series of tools and approaches to problems. In the terms of this thesis, however, the class--including the books, the intellectual tools, and especially the dialogue with other students and faculty--nevertheless currently constitutes the basic narrative which holds the CHID community together. Paige Schilt, a former CHID student, writes:

I think the common experience of the colloquium was immensely important [for creating community within CHID]. Having a large group of students who have all read

certain core texts facilitates conversation. I guess the colloquium would also be my answer to what I really liked about CHID. I return to certain texts I read in CHID 390 quite frequently. My master's report was about the use of ethnographic conversations in recent documentary films about black gay men ... but I returned to the James Clifford reading, for example, to write it." (Schilt 13? June 96)

The tools and approaches fostered by the CHID are strongly theoretical, drawing heavily on postmodern approaches, but unlike the theories critiqued by Zavarzadeh and Schilb, always with an emphasis on students as active and important participants in the generation of meaning within the classroom and the program as a whole. Concretely, the Peer Advisers as well as the Peer Facilitators who serve as "undergraduate TAs" in the classrooms of several CHID classes serve to validate this belief in the abilities of undergraduates, as does the emphasis on discussion and group activities. CHID both plays with theory and seriously considers the implications of, for example, race, class, and gender in the world, the classroom, and the individual.

Thus, for example, CHID 390 is generally led by a graduate student affiliated with the program or by a professor. It is not really "taught" because there is little specific content that is necessary to learn: facts, dates, and names are not of great importance, except as necessary to explore a theoretical issue. But while the class is determinedly theoretical, the issues investigated--the representation of people and cultures--are not merely theoretical mind-games. The class helps students reflect critically about themselves and about the world around them, to avoid merely taking facts and beliefs for granted, and to always question "truth." Inevitably, the class reaches a point of nihilism, as students realize that there is no concrete foundation, no objective basis for their beliefs. The next step within the class is to move beyond this recognition to an acceptance of subjectivity. In the end, the goal is to permit students to see themselves as members of a community of shared meaning and not as individuals operating in a world of objective truth. But this goal is necessarily both political and personal, and is itself a subjective approach. Part of the program is inevitably the questioning of the foundations of the program itself, and thus this goal of the program and of the class is always subject to change and critique, especially because many students resist the implicit power-relation in the classroom. Despite the efforts of the program to lessen the difference, a teacher still gives a grade to students. But every class is different and every student finds

different meaning (or no meaning at all) in the class and in the program as a whole.

One foundational concern of the program, a concern which guides this thesis, as well as much of CHID 390 and thus the development of students within the program, is an interest in notions of "the Other": with inclusion and exclusion, the construction of representations, aesthetics, and, always, power. This interest inevitably leads students outside of the "ivory tower" of the university and towards the broader issues of society in general. One locus of such issues is the debate over the literary canon, and this debate participates heavily in the concerns of the program and this thesis, especially the intersection and contention of power and aesthetics.

#### VII · Speaking of the Canon: A Narrative of Community

The debate over the Western literary canon--that list of commonly accepted works judged as "classics" and deemed worthy to be taught in classrooms--is a debate which participates in larger debates within the university and the general society of which the university is a part. It is a debate which is intimately concerned with inclusion and exclusion, marginality and centrality, tradition and change, and other broad issues of American society. For example, is the United States a world power because its approach to the world is simply better than those of other nations, or have we merely managed to amass the biggest guns? Have all the presidents of the United States been men because men are better able to run a country, or has a system of power operated to privilege men at the expense of women? Analogously, have the texts which constitute the canon come to be there through innate characteristics which make them aesthetically superior, or are they in the canon because of a system of power-relations which has placed them there?

All of these questions are closely connected with notions of community. Indeed, the literary canon is a kind of community, a textual community whose tides and storms are in many ways analogous to the movements within a human community. The community of texts which constitutes the canon is interwoven with the community of scholars who study them, the larger communities of general readers, and the even larger, even more general national and international communities which form the context in which works are read and evaluated. Thus, these multiple interacting and often inseparable communities are concerned with the same questions of aesthetics and power which concern the textual community. And if, as I argue, narrative constitutes the world of both people and books, then the connection between the literary canon and society becomes even

greater, for both come to be through similar narrative moves. So does one become a member, human or literary, of a community--a place I defined earlier in terms of its members experiencing an "aesthetic feeling of belonging to a larger whole"--for aesthetic reasons or for reasons of power? That is, does one simply "click" because of certain personality characteristics, for example, or does one become a community member because one is, say, a wealthy business executive? And is it even possible to firmly distinguish between the two?

In this section, then, I am concerned with this question of aesthetics versus power. But I am especially interested in avoiding a privileging of either term: I believe that the answer lies in neither aesthetics nor in power exclusively, but rather in a combination of power and aesthetics which undermines the construction of any dichotomy between them. Referring primarily to Virgil Nemoianu's article "Literary Canons and Social Value Options," I am seeking to reinvigorate the role of the aesthetic in the narrative of the Western canon itself, rather than focusing on the aesthetic qualities of its members. Throughout this paper I will be concerned with the importance of story, of narrative, and will be paying special attention to its role in creating and maintaining the Western literary canon, as well as its impact on community in general.

Our narrative of the canon is complex, encompassing three main elements: first, the story of the history of the canon, the rise and fall of various works within it, the "continuous slow movement inside it" (Nemoianu 222), and even our understanding of the etymology of the word "canon" itself; second, our more temporally constricted understanding of the current state of the canon, of the particular works within it now "that are chosen to be taught in class" (219), of the New Critical-style decontextualized elements within the texts, and so on; and third, the system of power relations "in which transferred values are pitted against each other" (219). The third element of power is the one that many other contemporary theorists view as determining both the first and second elements, which Nemoianu refers to as canonical and curricular, respectively. (Both elements are often collapsed into the single term "canon" by many writers.) Introducing long-term temporality into the canon serves as useful contextualizing, providing us with a sense that what is accepted as canonical is not static, but rather subject to a "continuous slow movement." But we even speak of the more temporally-restricted sense of the canon--Nemoianu's "curriculum"--as proceeding through time: despite the New Critical desire to detemporalize a work, we still justify the inclusion of works because of the history of their acceptance and on the basis of tradition. If we truly judged all works' entrance to a timeless canon (not unchanging, but rather detemporalized and

without the element of historical process) strictly by the textual workings within them--and if these inner textual working were truly devoid of intertextuality--then we would never know what to read, could never read other critical responses, because these would always reintroduce outside elements and thus would always reintroduce time. Since this is never done and is in truth never possible to do, if only because the language of a text always hints at a world beyond its covers, we instead view the canon as a narrative, even when we pretend (through another narrative move) not to do so.

In other words, the literary canon is a narrative construction. It is not a static phenomenon. It is created, generated, and maintained through story, and this story proceeds through time, always shifting, always in flux. Nemoianu writes, "The most striking thing--and, for resolute anticanonical activists, the most troubling--is that at the very center of the canon there seems to be, despite tidal changes, Brownian motilities, and quicksilver rearrangements, a certain constancy (225)." That to Nemoianu and other critics such as Harold Bloom there appears to be continuity is due to the ability of narrative to smooth out discontinuity, to mold the shape of change to a recognizable rhythm. As Nemoianu recognizes in "Literary Canons and Social Value Options," discontinuity in the canon is just as apparent as continuity. He mentions the debate over the status of vernacular authors and its eventual playing out over time: "the classics lost ground (slowly), while the 'moderns' gained ground and standing (at a fast rate)" (218). In addition, writers such as John Milton have undergone periodic attacks on their canonicity and others such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow have actually slipped away from canonical status. This visible discontinuity, change, and flux is also due to narrative, for even as narrative acts to smooth the appearance of change, it also preserves it by maintaining the temporal aspects of events. It is when the canon is viewed atemporally and ahistorically that it becomes either monolithic beast or comforting universal.

A similar effect is visible in communities of persons--there appears, for example, to be a certain constancy to our notions of "Black" and "White," "Asian" and "Caucasian." And we speak confidently about "Frenchness" and "Englishness," but all of these notions are narrative constructions that have shifted through time: slowly churning at certain points in history, rapidly appearing and disappearing at others. And our history of these events has itself shifted, for we have not always told the same story about the same events: Christopher Columbus has shifted for many from heroic navigator to despised conqueror. But our narrative of human communities, like our narrative of the canon, also represents, and



even focuses upon, times of rapid change: wars and plagues for example. Thus, like our historical narrative of the literary canon, our historical narrative of human communities contains both discontinuity and continuity, and both of these elements are maintained through story.

Nemoianu, recognizing both the continuity and discontinuity in the canon, nevertheless senses a "small number of stubbornly recurrent authors" at the "very center of the canon" (225). He asks, "Why is this center relatively stable or why does it seem difficult to displace?" (225). One answer is: because of the tendency of narrative towards reification. While narrative provides for flexibility and ambiguity--we can always tell a different story and we can thus always rewrite history--when a narrative is shared by a group, the group tends to conserve elements. One must gain the consent of more than a single member of a group to create change. Effecting change is thus a complex process, as Nemoianu again recognizes: it is not simply a matter of political power, for while attempts were made in the Soviet Union to ban certain authors, for example, they nevertheless retained their canonical status. But it is not necessarily a merely democratic matter to the exclusion of power--or, perhaps more accurately, democracy is all about power, as various groups and individuals struggle and contest to determine what will become of the group as a whole. Nemoianu is right to dispel the "straw man" of power-conspiracists: "secret huddles of fat, cigar puffing-capitalists, ... the sly sycophantic wordsmith sniffing out the preferences of the mighty and quickly concocting the desired objects" (229). But "dispel[ing] these little fantasies by looking at the facts around us" (229) and instead positing a democratic nomination of works in which "literate humans recognize themselves more often and better than in all others" (225), neglects the more subtle relations of power evident in, for example, universalizing quests (speaking of all "literate humans," for example).

This desire to discover the universal in the canonical is apparent as well in Harold Bloom, who writes,

Shakespeare for hundreds of millions who  
are not white Europeans is a signifier for  
their own pathos, their own sense of  
identity with the characters that  
Shakespeare fleshed out by his language.  
For them his universality is not historical  
but fundamental; he puts their lives upon  
his stage. (38)

But such a formulation neglects the problems inherent in Bloom's

speaking for "hundreds of millions who are not white Europeans." It is not much of a stretch to view this statement in postcolonial terms and then to wonder if these people who are "not white Europeans" (which in itself sets white Europeans at the center of the discourse) are perhaps concerned with Shakespeare because his is the voice of the colonizing culture. Perhaps his voice must be engaged with in order to deal successfully with the dominant European colonizer. It is thus only the colonially transformed selves of these "non white Europeans" which recognize Shakespeare's "universality." And when E.D. Hirsch speaks of the importance of the canon for maintaining "cultural literacy," it almost begs the questions: whose culture is being maintained and at whose expense? These questions lead one inexorably towards a sense, reminiscent of Michel Foucault, that power relations reign supreme.

Indeed, many contemporary theorists, such as Richard Ohmann, Gerald L. Bruns, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, would position power as the primary determinant of aesthetic sensibility. For them, we never read nor appreciate a work outside of a power relation which has "always already" determined our aesthetic taste. Ohmann writes that "aesthetic value arises from class conflict" (Ohmann 219). For Smith,

The recurrent impulse or effort to define aesthetic value by contradistinction to all forms of utility or as the negation of all other namable sources of interest or forms of value--hedonic, practical, sentimental, ornamental, historical, ideological, and so forth--is, in effect, to define it out of existence; for when all such particular utilities, interests, and sources of value have been subtracted, nothing remains. (Smith 14)

In the end, books--literary, historical, or simply "practical," like a manual for a car--are always read in a context rife with the traces of worldly power. These contemporary theorists thus create a dichotomy between power and the aesthetic in an attempt to reveal the often unacknowledged role of power, while at the same time attempting to subvert the limitations of the dichotomy by emphasizing the penetration of power into the aesthetic.

But this penetration is not unreciprocated, for the aesthetic too is woven into the realm of power and into analysis. Our very understanding of power relations is in terms of historical narrative, which is itself integrally bound into the aesthetic. History is a story

that appeals to our emotions and to our intuition. It is these almost undefinable elements of story, of narrative, which constitute the aesthetic. Because of its ineffability, the aesthetic is resistant to analysis. To focus on power is often to neglect the aesthetic elements in the narrative of the canon itself as well as the aesthetic force of the works within it, for the stories we tell ourselves about events, the narratives we construct, are creations of both analysis and poetry, power and aesthetics. To investigate power and to see its ever-present influence even in the aesthetic realm is an exercise in analysis which serves a useful purpose: it reveals many of the underlying reasons for events and for personal and political relations. Our sense of the aesthetic is, after all, historically determined and temporally limited, and through an analysis of power relations we may well come to an historical understanding of why a work has become canonical, who benefits by its status, how hegemonic relations are maintained, and so on. But the aesthetic--the literary, the poetic, the beautiful--exists outside of this analysis. Of course, the term "aesthetic" is a problematic one, subject to lengthy critical debate, contrary definitions, and unclear usage. But this is exactly what, for me, characterizes it. For Immanuel Kant the beautiful thing is outside utility; for Kenneth Burke, it is the deviant. For me, it is that which appeals to our emotional selves and gives a richer, intuitive understanding of the world which, while yielding to analysis, nevertheless forever escapes it.

A focus upon the analysis of power in the production of the literary canon thus neglects the degree to which the canon narrative is an aesthetic phenomenon. But avoiding an analysis of power equally neglects the difficulty apparent in the current canon: namely, its exclusion of marginalized groups such as African-Americans and women. The commonly accepted list of canonical works, while subject to variation, is overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, composed of works by white males operating in the Western tradition. A glance through the list of fifty-seven works dealt with by the Modern Language Association's *Approaches to Teaching World Literature* series (1996), which seeks to collect teaching methods of commonly taught texts, is revealing: ten are about women authors and five or so deal with non-Western themes. Merely counting works in this series neglects the complexity of the canon, but is nevertheless indicative of the general trend.

The attacks of the traditional canon have often started from exactly this beginning point, with many theorists calling for an opening of the canon to marginalized groups--that is, groups other than white European males. They argue that opening the canon is necessary because the current canon is unfairly exclusionary. Established through the power of white European males, its continued

existence serves to maintain the dominance of this privileged group while excluding others. Lillian S. Robinson, for example, "argues that the dominant culture's supposedly neutral aesthetic values are framed in ways that make it difficult or impossible for disadvantaged groups to enter the canon" (Richter 115). Her solution "is to work toward getting literature by women and minorities admitted into 'the' canon by systematically contesting the cultural biases of the values upon which the current canon rests" (115). On the other hand, such defenders of the canon as Allan Bloom and E.D. Hirsch, following in the footsteps of Matthew Arnold, see the canon as the exemplum of the best that has ever been written, and argue for the value of tradition as a force maintaining a common thread of "cultural literacy."

The canon does provide a center, a grounding point, a central core of shared knowledge which can indeed (and sometimes does) establish a kind of normative "cultural literacy," for it is true that "at the very center of the canon there seems to be ... a small number of stubbornly recurrent authors and works" (Nemoianu 225). But whose knowledge and whose culture is thus normalized and shared? As James A. Winders asks, "What should be taught (and how)? Should the claims of a (particularly Western, largely white male) canon be vigorously reasserted?" (4). And even as the canon serves as a center point, is there really a center of culture to occupy? And, since any notion of centrality necessarily excludes those things which are not central--the in-group and the out-group--what happens to those books and those groups which then become marginalized?

In the end, there is never any true center to a culture--the entire construction is so interwoven and so self-referential that beginnings, endings, margins and centers, are places which are impossible to finally nail down. They do not, finally, exist, for when we look closely, the stitching that holds them in place comes unraveled before our analytic eye. The only recourse has been a "series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chains of determinations of the center" ("Structure" 1117). That is, we have created "different forms or names" (1118) for the center in order to conceal from ourselves that it is merely a fictional construct. Once this was recognized, Jacques Derrida continues,

it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus, but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions come into

play. ... This was the moment when ...  
everything became discourse--provided we  
can agree on this word--that is to say, a  
system in which the central signified, the  
original or transcendental signified, is  
never absolutely present outside a system  
of differences. The absence of the  
transcendental signified extends the  
domain and the play of signification  
infinitely. (1118)

But despite the lack of a true center, of a "transcendental signifier," we can still create fictional ones. We can establish fictions of centrality which then exclude and include certain books, certain ideas, certain people. In other words, in spite of Derridean "rupture" (1118), "everything happens as if" these centers and margins actually exist (indeed, the notion of rupture itself requires the idea of a center).

The way in which one constructs something, envisions it, describes it, or tells about it has a large impact on its function and effect within one's culture. "Literature may well be called an institution," writes Nemoianu, "but surely not in the same sense in which we call the House of Commons an institution. Yet explicit and crystallized structures are called into life precisely through the opposition against an assumed institutional status" (215). Constructing a narrative or world-view in which a canon exists results in a world in which a canon really does exist. In a sense, by attacking the canon of accepted works, critics have created the canon, created the center and the margins, and marginalized works. There is not necessarily any inherent difference between center and margin, "but that speaking makes it so." But equally, such articulation allows for the freedom of both center and margin, the freedom to write and rewrite the canon.

But this "freedom" is intimately bound to issues of power. For example, one can imagine the reading of a text as analogous to an encounter with another, previously "undiscovered," group, as in Christopher Columbus' "discovery" of the natives of the Americas. From the European perspective, the Americas and their inhabitants did not exist until Columbus; in this sense, Columbus "discovered" them. On the other hand, from the perspective of the Native Americans, it is a laughable thought to have been "discovered." The "readings" of this new group by Europeans were as determined by the Europeans' historical background as a reading of any book. The Native Americans were (and are) in much more rapid flux than most texts, capable of actively transforming themselves to influence European perceptions. But books too are

in flux, both because the language within them changes (because our language for reading them changes) and because the context in which they are presented changes. The key difference in fluidity is the ability of either book or culture to function as a subject in the eyes of the perceiving subject. When a book or a culture is objectified, it becomes a much more static phenomenon, prone to reification (the "Noble Savage," canonicity) and deprived of its ability to transform itself. It tends instead to be controlled by others. The traditional Western literary canon--and Western culture as a whole-- is thus an example of a (not completely) reified fiction of centrality.

"Literary canons," Nemoianu argues, "remain always *as if*" (217). In addition, the texts which are the substance of the literary canon are as slippery as the canon itself, for they too exist only "*as if*." Our readings of a particular text, far from eliciting the universal elements of what it means to be human, are instead the historically bound readings of a particular reader in a particular place and time. Indeed, the very existence of a text is doubtful, for without a reader to translate the symbols of a text into meaningful associations, a translation that is never the same from one place and time to the next, a text is nonexistent from the perspective of a reader. As Nemoianu argues, this state of indeterminance characteristic of literature is somewhat different from the state of the Catholic religious canon, for the Catholic canon is, in some senses, unarguable. There is a clear power group which maintains and controls it: the Catholic Church. While parts may be added or taken away, what is currently a part of it is (at least apparently) clearly evident. But the similarities between the literary canon and the Catholic canon are even more striking, for both are fictional (this is not meant to be collapsed into "falsity") and are established and maintained through a narrative framework. Each always remain "*as if*."

The key difference is in terms of worldly power: ecclesiastical canonicity has been the focus of a much greater power struggle than literary canonicity. Thus Nemoianu is able to argue that "the stakes of a truly canonical dispute" are very high (217). If literature has in the past been a whirlpool of debate around which only weak currents of power have flowed, then it is obvious that "all the 'canonical' disputes in literature" should merely "have added mere coloring and nuance to a history that was advancing in any case" (218). If power is located elsewhere, then the stories of literary struggle will have little impact, and history will apparently continue "advancing in any case." But as power shifts, as literature becomes a locus of power relations, then the debate will begin to have higher stakes. Traditionalists are perhaps right to believe that changing the canon threatens the very existence of American

society *as we know it*, for the canon today has become a site of contending power.

Regardless of the level of power, it is narrative which establishes the mythical framework in which a work becomes, and continues to be, canonical. The canon is a myth because it is generated through story and is powerful and appealing at an almost unconscious level. We may "simply" feel that a work belongs and we may even rage against theory for arguing or modifying our feeling. But our feeling emerges through theory, itself a myth, a story, a narrative, and thus our rage is against becoming conscious of a process we feel is simply natural. (We are "always already" immersed in the stories we tell. We can never escape to a "true reality.")

Two issues now emerge. One, because the canon is a human construct composed of human constructs, it is a fluid thing. It is thus obvious that medieval reading lists should appear so odd to us today--it is not to say that they did not possess a group of works they considered canonical nor that we do not as well, but merely to suggest that the canon is not static. It is always in flux. Second, works are not naturally admitted to the canon. Instead, we admit works--or even "rediscover" works--based on categories we define. It seems natural to us that the *Aeneid*, for example, is rich in textual possibilities; but, after all, we as a society have been conditioned to search for textual possibilities in ways that are adapted to it. That is, describing the *Aeneid* as textually rich is peculiarly circular: it is richly textured because it defines what it means to be so, and it defines what it is to be a rich text because it is such a text. As readers heir to the Western culture of which Virgil's *Aeneid* is a part, we have been conditioned to approach texts in ways which are similar to--though never identical to, and often radically different from--others in our culture. But if we decided that works should be read based on different criteria, or that textual richness was apparent in a different fashion, then there is no objective reason why we should ignore James Michener's books.

But I have collapsed the complexity of the process of canon construction and reconstruction by saying that "we admit works based on categories we define." Who is this "we"? What is a "work"? How do "we" "define" "categories" and then "admit" "works" which "fit" them? Power is always involved, but power is not the only factor which impacts the acceptance of works into the canon--a canon which does not necessarily exist, except as a concept, to begin with. In a sense, by attacking the canon of accepted works, anticanonical writers have reinforced the traditional canon, established a narrative of center and margin, and

positioned certain works as marginal, for nothing is either central or marginal, "but that speaking makes it so." But such articulation also permits the freeing of both center and margin, and the questioning of the power of tradition. Speaking of the canon allows for the possibility of rewriting the canon.

While traditionalists such as Allan Bloom, E.D. Hirsch, and Harold Bloom may lament the passing of the Western canon, such a shift seems both inevitable and necessary because the locus of power is shifting. But if they are correct to believe that, in the end, the only works that survive into eventual canonicity are those which possess eternal aesthetic value, then they truly have nothing to fear in the long term: eventually authors such as Virgil and Shakespeare, Milton and Cervantes will reemerge alongside other "Great Works." But if they are not, then their struggle is just beginning. In any case, it seems clear that, to use Nemoianu's words, "an opening towards areas of the secondary, of marginality and heteronomy, and a more generous valuation spread over broader areas of textuality" is inevitable; one can only hope that Nemoianu's belief that this "will be saluted by the scholarly and playful alike" (215) is correct, and that he worries needlessly that literature may "find itself diminished and constricted" by "hard and simple canons" in a period of "accelerated change" (244). In the end, this is the power, and thus the danger, of narrative: to generate and maintain fictions of centrality which are the focus of power, reification, struggle, and change.

#### VIII · Towards Closure: Reading/Writing the Future of CHID

CHID 390 currently positions a number of texts and approaches as central to the CHID approach. As such, it establishes a fiction of centrality which necessarily excludes certain elements: as one example, several Christians have felt themselves to be outsiders within the program. In addition, narrative tends to establish fictions of flow which limit and contain disruption. We create a story of our world which feels seamless and unbroken. Both of these narrative effects--fictions of flow and fictions of centrality--tend to establish boundaries of "us" and "them," "insider" and "outsider," "Self" and "Other." But these boundaries are also strongly associated with community, for feeling a part of something appears to necessarily involve exclusion: exclusion follows inclusion. The question I return to, then, is how to generate community without fixed boundaries, how to have a feeling of belonging without exclusivity.

There is no simple answer to this, but one method of mediating the problem is to combine the analytical and self-critical elements of CHID--elements which tend toward the individualistic and atomistic--with the mythical and aesthetic elements which are a



key element of community. This combination of the aesthetic with the analytic is difficult: it requires continual critique in order to keep the boundaries flexible, while at the same time requiring acceptance of story and a willingness to relinquish analysis in favor of aesthetics when the occasion warrants.

But this balanced approach posits two opposing poles, one of analysis and one of aesthetics. Drawing on my notions of the literary canon and, more generally, of narrative, however, allows one to begin to escape this duality and to begin to view the two poles not as opposing and contrary elements, but rather as interwoven and interdependent, and as always subject to rewriting. That is, recognizing that our fictions of centrality (ourselves as individuals, the Western literary canon, the West in general, men, humanity) are constructed through story, through narrative, through a particular perspective and tale about the world, but also realizing that this story is intimately linked to power in the world (falling off a cliff, nuclear arms) allows us to look at both as one, or one as both, or in whatever terms we may construct. To bring the circle around again, they are separate units in this thesis only because I have spoken of them in this way. To speak of analysis and myth in terms of opposition is merely one way to tell the story; by writing a new narrative, we can reconstruct them in a new way, not as contrary and irreconcilable but as harmonious and inseparable. Narrative then becomes the mediating element between our artificially constructed oppositions, allowing an escape from duality and a new approach to the world.

Part of this new approach to the world can be a reintegration of gift, a recognition that a gift economy provides an excellent means of knitting a community together. Already programs such as Comparative History of Ideas recognize the importance of valuing the ability of undergraduate students to contribute to academic knowledge, a recognition that involves a move away from positioning students as customers in a market-oriented university. But in order to achieve a more broad-based change within both the university and the world in general, we must together tell a new story, one that emphasizes gift relationships and the interconnections between ourselves. It is only through a narrative shift that we can achieve a Kuhnian "paradigm shift" away from positioning terms within our world in terms of dichotomy: without a new story, aesthetics and power, gift and commodity, Self and Other will always be separate, and often in opposition and conflict.

Of course, merely telling ourselves that the world has changed is not enough for a complete narrative reconstruction; it is necessary for others to believe in our construct--from a narrative of community comes reality as we know it, but this reality is created

by groups, not by individuals. Thus narrative, even as it constitutes power relations, aesthetic responses, and analytic approaches, is also in its turn constituted by them. There is no escape; everything is interwoven; everything is connected: "The center cannot hold..." The future of CHID, like the future of the world, is a story yet to be told, but by re-reading the past we can begin to write a new future.

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