A Struggle for Meaning: Students, the Apocalypse, and Cliché

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On September 11, 2001, one of my students emailed me, asking, "How is this for an Apocalypse?" My plan in 2000 to construct a course that examined the end-times seemed, if not prophetic, at least timely and significant in ways that it was not before that attack. The attacks provided a renewed relevance to the discussions my students and I had been engaged in. Later that week, I asked my students to reflect on the events of September 11, 2001, just as I had asked them to write about other issues. One student wrote, "Then, the dread, horror, and outrage set in. It seems lately that the apocalypse's shadow is everywhere I turn for the last few weeks. Blame it on this class, or call it a warning. Either way, what this whole tragedy [sic] signifies to me is the beginning of the end." Though in other, significant ways they denied the relevance of the End, in the weeks that followed 9/11 my students revealed to me the prevalence – even if unarticulated and delitescent – of the End as a frame of reference for making sense of the world.[1]

As I examined the responses of students taking this class in Fall 2000 and 2001, as well as Spring 2002, I began to see a struggle with language, a struggle to name and to connect with academic inquiry and to issues and concerns that transcend the academic. Far from clearly understanding why they are in college, let alone why they are "here" in a broader existential sense, my students seem so often directionless, while at the same time determined to do...something about something somewhere at sometime. Their papers and course evaluations revealed their struggle with the ambiguity, imprecision, and failure of language and the emptiness of academic inquiry felt by many students. My students struggle to name what they believe, what they want; they struggle to understand complicated ideas not because they lack the intelligence or wherewithal, not because they are solely concerned with other matters more important to them, but because their language use does not prepare them to think equivocally. Despite Dawn Skorczewski's argument in her essay "'Everybody has their Own Ideas': Responding to Cliché in Student Writing" that the use of cliché is a moment of power for students, my students' reliance on cliché prevented them from understanding the End as a means of making sense of the world. Their struggle to name the experience, that is to articulate a complex belief or idea, often ended in the reduction of that experience and that idea into cliché which they (often reluctantly, I think) let stand in for a more complicated response. Their writing revealed their unhappiness and dissatisfaction with clichés. But finding only murky, long-winded, convoluted alternatives, they often accepted them anyway.

Why Teach this Course?

The predictions of doom forecast by the media as the end of the millennium approached enthralled and captivated me. And even though I smugly followed the line of thinking that said the *real* end of the millennium was January 31, 2001, I often found myself taking a keen, maybe prurient, interest in hype that surrounded Y2K. I started wondering, as many did, what exactly was meant by the "End-times." I had seen Hollywood's version of the End in post-apocalyptic movies starring Jean-Claude VanDamme and Arnold Swarzenegger, so I knew how popular media represented the world after the End. I have also read enough science-fiction to be able to call up some possible paths to annihilation, including alien intervention in Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* and humanity's self-inflected destruction through the creation of Ice-9 in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*. There are, it seems, an unlimited number of ways to bring about the end of the world. More realistically, of course, I knew that one need only read the newspapers or consider casually the American lifestyle to see that we are slowly destroying our natural world, creating the conditions for a global environmental apocalypse. Yet I wasn't all that clear on how the process of ending was being (or could be) imagined by those for whom apocalyptic prognostication was serious spiritual business.

As a good academic, I decided to teach a course about a subject I had a deep interest in, but knew little about. A thematic Honors section of a first-year writing course that I was teaching seemed the perfect course in which to explore questions about the End-times. So I planned a course on representing the Apocalypse that would include reading and analyzing Biblical passages, critical texts, novels, and films. We would analyze attempts to represent it, and my students would in turn grapple with the concepts in their own critical essays. I wanted texts that approached the Apocalypse from varying perspectives: the Judeo-Christian concept of the End, but also other critical perspectives that worked within and against and completely outside that tradition. Were there ways to imagine and represent the Apocalypse beyond those of a Beast, an Abyss, and Four Horsemen, I wondered. After all, the root of the word lies not in destruction but in revelation, and so must there not be many ways to reveal, many perspectives to be revealed?

Each semester we began with *The Revelation to John* (with some references to Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and others). We also read popular representations of the Apocalypse including three novels: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, and Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. Interspersed were critical texts that worked to define and explore apocalyptic thought from various perspectives: psychoanalytical, Biblical, literary, linguistic, and socio-cultural. The students wrote four traditional[3] academic papers, three based on the novels we read and the fourth a collaborative project in which they explored how different belief systems, including various cults, millennial and otherwise, imagine and represent the End. Most of my students enjoyed the fourth paper the most, as they got to write about those weird followers of Heaven's Gate or those cool Rastafarians.

The class, overall, was a success, though not without its difficulties and disappointments. I was most disappointed with myself, as early on I had foreclosed the discussion of Apocalypticism from a personal, faith-based perspective: we will, I told the class, examine *Revelations* as a work of literature, not as a religious text. Not a scholar of religion, I did not want this course to turn into one about religion, and I wanted to enable discussions of other, non-Judeo-Christian perspectives on the End. Ruling out personal, faith-based perspectives, however, drove a wedge between the material and my students, as did requiring them to write traditional academic analyses of the texts we read.

When I started to think about this class, I imagined that it would be one where students are so enthralled by the topic we explore together that they cannot help but be transformed in some way. I hoped that the course would galvanize their interest in literacy, in the power of the written word, in the power of language. High expectations. Since our focus was on the End, those expectations did not seem quite so high. I took as truth bell hooks' statement that "Students also suffer . . . from a crisis of meaning, unsure about what has value in life, unsure even about whether it is important to stay alive. They long for a context in which their subjective needs can be integrated with study . . . where there is serious and rigorous critical exchange" (81). If, I assumed, the End cannot bring meaning to our lives, if the End cannot bring into focus the concerns, fears, hopes that mark our subconscious and our spiritual connection to the world and to others, then what on Earth could?

One day towards the end of the semester I asked my students whether the material of this course had altered the way they viewed or made sense of the world. Although not what I had hoped for, their answers were revealing. One student wrote that she "enjoyed reading the text about the Holocaust; I am planning on majoring in German and I am taking a German history course right now so I was happy to see that this was one of our reading assignments." Here was a student who found a way to make her first semester meaningful by stumbling into a course that had resonance beyond the grade. She concluded her response by claiming that the apocalypse "has never been an important topic in my life, but now I can say that it is somewhat." Because the class had extended the idea to mean more than the end of the world, more than what we see leaching out from Hollywood and particular and vocal segments of the religious right, her final response, the idea that Endings can be "somewhat relevant" or somewhat important, struck me as oddly dangerous.

It is one thing to say that the Judeo-Christian ending or the Islamic[4] concept of the end is somewhat important. It seems to me an entirely different statement to claim that Endings in *general* are "somewhat important." After all, "The End as a 'concept'," Paul Corcoran writes, "serves as a ground of meaning for human aspirations and a foundation for human projects. Human consciousness of the End activates our capacity. . .to make meaning" (7). Such a statement, however complexly articulated, should come as no great insight to anyone living in the Western world. What does Corcoran mean that is fundamentally different from what Joni Mitchell told us: "You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone." Or for those more up to date, musically speaking, the line from *Semisonic's* song "Closing Time" that "every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end." The clichés simultaneously elide and signal deeper meaning, and the evidence favors Corcoran (and Mitchell). What does this mean for my student who seems to disavow Corcoran's claim? She, in effect, removes herself from one powerful means of making sense of present experience, from the existential meaning of the end.

Of course other equally valid ways of making sense of the world exist. Edward Edinger, however, argues that the Apocalypse has applications to psychological states and to life-changing experiences beyond the Biblical end of the world. Drawing on the work of C.G. Jung, Edinger writes that "the 'Apocalypse' means the momentous event of the coming of the Self into conscious realization" (5). (Popular culture plays with this insight in the cliché: "Wake up and smell the coffee."). I don't mean to imply that Edinger's analysis and insight should be rendered cliché, but I do want to remark on the availability of that insight through popular discourse. Anyone casually aware of twentieth-century American culture will have encountered the idea of the Apocalypse, even if in a watered-down, denuded form.

If we accept Edinger's definition, then what does that say about my student's contention that such experiences, that making sense of them, are "somewhat important"? Despite the evening news and the work of Elisabeth Kubler Ross, Death in American culture is a topic we go out of our way to avoid. Perhaps, there is leakage from those non-discussions into a discussion of the End: we don't want to think about it. If we cannot talk about the end of a parent, a loved one, a sibling or friend, how much harder to really imagine the end of a culture or way of being; we need only witness reactions to September 11th to see how far we go to avoid root causes. We turn our attention, instead, outward towards the Other whom we condemn and punish in order to find peace.

But my students are intelligent, insightful individuals, so I suspect there is more to it than simple cultural prohibition. I suspect, actually, that students do not know *how* to talk about the End. In part this is a consequence of the "cliché-ing" effect of mass-media. But more importantly, talking about the End has less to do with a real fear of the End than it does with a lack of means, a lack of terms and concepts, of complexity of language. It makes perfect sense that we would disavow the complex when the ways we use to articulate it are empty of any real thought. If we can simply say "home is where the heart is" and everyone "knows" what we mean, then what purpose does a more complicated response serve? The former is easy, facile; the latter murky, perhaps uncomfortable. Gerald Graff's argument that students need a terminology of literary study before they can realize they have something to say about a text is perhaps applicable here. No, my students' ambivalence is not a lack of developmental depth, not a culturally enforced myopia. Instead, my students seem simply not to have the means for articulating and exploring a concept as murky and meaningful as the End in a way that allows them to move beyond the clichéd response. Not surprisingly, since little in our lives acknowledges, let alone prepares us for, the necessity of complex, equivocal thought, we do not move very often beyond or through the cliché to really address what is at stake.

The End as a Framework

Before getting too far along, we should ask what we get from a study of the End-times. What can we learn from this course that we could not learn in other ways? A course on the Apocalypse borders on the, well, cliché, given its timing at the start of the new millennium. The events of September 11th seemed only to illuminate the shallowness of what this class attempted to do, suggesting that it could only be a shadow of real suffering, real endings. Yet the failed apocalypse of the millennium and the terrorist attacks were crucial to this course. In the face of media-sponsored reaction like the mass hysteria, the hoarding of survival items, the growing number of apocalyptic cults, and later fear-mongering and call to war sounded by those who were angry and hurt and scared and those who saw an opportunity, this course could offer an antidote.

Studying the End should simply "bring awareness of meaning to our lives." Paul Boyer writes that apocalypticism, defined as "the form of eschatology believing that these events are in some sense imminent" (McGinn 2), merits our attention "not only because any belief system embraced by millions demands notice, but also because a great many Americans view global events, domestic politics and contemporary social issues through the prism of end-time Bible prophecy belief" (Boyer 155). I am reminded of the weekly television program *Jack Van Impe Presents* hosted by Van Impe and his wife Rexella; in the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon they found renewed evidence for their contention that we were not just nigh unto the End but deep, deep into it. Sales figures for the *Left Behind* series by Jerry

Jenkins and Tim LeHaye top 50 million copies sold; their *Left Behind – The Kids* off-shoot tops 10 million copies.

For those searching for them, signs of the coming Apocalypse were there: the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the crumbling of the Berlin wall, the 1993 siege of the Branch Davidean compound in Waco, Heaven's Gate and their mass suicide at the return of the Hale-Bopp comet, the cancellation of Seattle's New Year's celebration in 1999, and the relocation that same year of members of the doomsday sect Concerned Christians to Jerusalem where they hoped to spark the Second Coming. We need to understand that these responses signal not the actions of a deranged, unbalanced fringe, but signal instead a search for meaning, a way of making sense of the world and their place in it. In a *Frontline* sponsored discussion about apocalypticism, Paul Boyer notes that "Apocalyptic belief systems ... speak to such basic human needs: for a sense of meaning and order in history, for the promise of a better world, for the drama and excitement they can add to life" ("Apocalyptic Roundtable"). And in that same discussion, Michael Barkun claims that "Apocalyptic beliefs can reinforce a sense of moral order by, for example, advancing a scenario of struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness; a struggle that is to climax in a final battle where the forces of light will be triumphant. In a world where good people often suffer and the wicked prosper, the promise of an imminent moral accounting is profoundly consoling" ("Apocalyptic Roundtable"). Jokes about millennialists aside, much remains at stake for those who believe that an End is (ever) nigh.

And there are many who do. "A TIME/CNN poll finds that more than one-third of Americans say they are paying more attention now to how the news might relate to the end of the world [...]. Fully 59% say they believe the events in Revelation are going to come true, and nearly one-quarter think the Bible predicted the Sept. 11 attack" (Gibbs). Whatever else it may be, the End-times are serious business to many, and therefore worthy of study and careful thought. Though the respondents mentioned in *Time*'s poll may not have been thinking about the End in this way, Paul Corcoran tells us that "The End is . . . something like a universal category of mortal, and moral, contemplation" (7). As in Barkun's comment above, apocalyptic struggles reveal an underlying need for a moral universe, for a system that literally *makes* sense

The Problem of Language

To draw such conclusions we need to have the ability and the language to articulate and frame complicated ideas. As Peter Reich tells us, "Language is a manifestation of the general human capacity for symbolic representation" (322). So then, here is the problem that I encountered with my students (and it bears repeating, my students are not being singled out here as somehow deficient; they, we, exist in a culture which encourages clichéd response): how does one enter into a conversation about the End-times when one's basic language skills create not a stable base for complex exploration, but a slippery surface where meaning slides continually off, just beyond articulation. The end is a beginning. What does that even mean? And what happens when that question is not asked? On a very basic level, few of my honors students saw the need to work through the complicated theoretical matrix of the course: language, Endings, and what James Berger calls an "historical trauma," a condition whereby an historical event is so traumatic that it functions as a psycho-socio break: an event that "transforms the word that follows so as to make it incommensurable with what went before" (61).

At the end of the semester, we turned to what I had called on the syllabus the "lived apocalypse," a study of the Shoah that we approached primarily through Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*. Spiegelman attempts to understand and represent his father's experiences as a Jew in Poland during the Nazi occupation. Recognizing the inherent problems in representing such trauma and the problem of testimony in general and that of his father Vladic's in particular, he draws the Jews as mice, the Nazis as cats, and the Poles as pigs. As a class, we discussed the difficulty of Holocaust representation, drawing on selections from

James Berger's book *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*, a lengthy study of the Holocaust as Apocalypse. In one of the chapters, Berger quotes Arthur Cohen, a noted scholar of the Holocaust, who writes,

> Thinking and the death camps are incommensurable. . . . The death camps are a reality which, by their very nature, obliterate thought and the human program of thinking. . . . [The holocaust was a] *tremendum* of the abyss, a phenomenon without analogue, discontinuous from all that has been, a new beginning for the human race that knew not of what it was capable. . . . We must create a new language in which to speak of this in order to destroy the old language which, in its decrepitude and decline, made facile and easy the demonic descent. (qtd. in Berger, 60)

To be sure, this passage from Cohen is a mouthful for most of us; comprehension requires some inter-textual analysis of Berger's and Cohen's texts, but his argument about the Holocaust is crucial to understanding Berger's use of "historical trauma," Spiegelman's decision to represent Jews as mice, and to making sense of the Holocaust as a lived Apocalypse.

In their struggle over the vocabulary in the passage by Cohen (and in others), my students pushed aside the deeper issues of witness testimony and representation. Not surprisingly, they did not know the definitions of the terms incommensurable, phenomenon, analogue, or discontinuous. Surprisingly, they did not look these terms up, even though without them they could not even begin to make sense of what Cohen, let alone Berger, was trying to argue. They would not deny that the Holocaust is an important event with which we should all be familiar, but their actions and their refusal, however passive, to contend and engage with the texts signals an assumption that if what we are to learn from any text does not conform with what we already know (that the Holocaust was terrible, the Nazis were horrible, but the fact that there were survivors means that ultimately the event was redemptive), then it will be disregarded, glossed over, and ultimately recycled in what Berger calls "visions of history that disavow trauma" (155). Berger cites Ronald Reagan as the most effective glosser of the bunch, even naming the condition after him: to disavow trauma, to disavow any other state than achieved Utopia is to suffer from Reaganism. Such a view does not, according to Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer, allow "us to understand what exceeds the limits of knowledge" (ix), because, in such a view of the world, nothing does.

The students' unwillingness, perhaps refusal, to look up those terms made it even harder to work through what Cohen meant by the term "tremendum," a term I also had to look up. A basic definition may have helped my students: why, they might have wondered, is Cohen using a term describing the "awe" of religious experience in conjunction with the horrors of the Holocaust? Further investigation would reveal that Cohen is more concerned with the definition given to tremendum by A. G. Hebert in *Brilioth's Eucharistic Faith & Practice*. Tremendum "is an expression for the awfulness of the holy, the *tremendum*, which belongs to all deep religion" (OED On-Line, 5 March 2001). In that definition we see the emphasis on the interconnection between the profound ("Coming as if from the depths of one's being") and the awful ("Dreadful; appalling," but also "worthy of profound respect or reverential fear.") The insight that knowledge of the Holy can have negative and unpleasant repercussions is crucial. Without that more complicated definition of tremendum, and with language practices that rely on truisms, the Holocaust becomes another historical horror, denuded of its spiritual consequences, and thus one that is easily contained . My students already "knew" the meaning of the Holocaust as Ending, for an ending is really about beginnings. But discussions of the holy as awful should lead to a discussion of the term Holocaust ("burnt offering") or Shoah ("catastrophe or calamity"). Yet, a discussion of the choice in naming the Holocaust or Shoah reveals that it was a choice in the first place, that there was (and is) a discussion of what to call the pogrom in Europe from 1933 – 1944, that to name it the

Holocaust is to imbue it with theological repercussions, that to name it Shoah is to recognize an earlier pogrom and the perennial persecution of Jewry. Without that discussion, meaning is not complicated, but obvious.

Explorations of the End require a sophisticated literacy, one that has moved beyond the quick reference to the dictionary, though it does often begin there. For my students, reading was not comprehension or inquiry, but looking at the words and fitting in what they saw with what they already knew or had learned; when faced with difficult passages, they ignored them, thus ignoring the more complicated, more disturbing, more problematic consequences of the Holocaust because they were not easily packaged in the common narratives of the Holocaust: Hitler (the Germans, the Poles, Italians, etc.) were bad and the Allied forces (most especially the U.S.) were good; "that sort of thing could never happen now"; "it was the fault of one man." The danger here, as Bernard-Donals and Glejzer claim, is that we begin to ". . .equate the object of representation with either the viewer's own experience or with his ability to construct a knowledge that makes the experience commensurable with other objects or events" (ix). One student writes, in response to the documentary *Night and Fog*, "So, basically, this film just made me angry – that nobody stopped this, but instead just went along with Hitler's plan and let these innocent people suffer for so long." My students are not alone in this, of course, as this same behavior was so often repeated in the popular press and by our elected politicians after (and before) the attacks on the Trade Towers and the Pentagon.

The Reinscription of Dominant Tropes

The problem in vocabulary, in sophistication of language, and in willingness to confront new vocabulary leads to a difficult problem. Because they lacked the necessary literacy skills, my students often simply reinscribed dominant tropes, truisms, and clichés about the world. Such moves are not endemic solely to the classroom, for clichés and their cousins euphemisms are almost the life blood of our interaction with the world: The Patriot Act, outsourcing, flexible work force, limited engagement, side-effects....

Historical trauma and its concomitant demand that we reevaluate what it means to be human get translated into a self-affirmation that led one of my students to write that an apocalypse can simply be something "that leads a person to a new beginning." Consequently, this student contends, "everyone has their own idea of what an apocalypse is." While Skorcewski claims that "the cliché can signal testimony to a different kind of power for a student" (230), for that testimony to be actual power, there needs to be first an awareness of the statement as cliché, something Skorcewski seems to gloss; the power comes in the usurpation of the banal, not merely in its use. One of the difficulties or problems with cliché is that we don't, as Skorcewski points out, recognize them as such: they are givens, stand-ins for reflection, for meaning. We are all good at turning complicated and difficult ideas into generic, facile statements of belief; when faced with an event that has no analogue in the packaged world we know, we make cliché the depth of experience. We seek to hide from the knowledge that some concepts, ideas, and events cannot be named, categorized and placed in the construct of experience and memory. Thus, we avoid what is said or implied in favor of what we want to hear / have already heard: self-discovery and entitlement to voice one's own opinion. Given the backdrop of our discussion of "historical trauma" and the Shoah, indeed the events of September 11th, however, that my honors students should so quickly move away from the complex to the simple and relativistic was not so much surprising as it was unnerving.

If questions of faith and what it means to be human are so easily reduced to something less than sublime, where does that leave any discussion of meaning larger than the moment in which we exist? How does one talk about the complexities of faith and of the End-times and their impact on not only our individual lives but also on, as Cohen argues, our sense of what it means to be human, when one's language use requires that it be done in reductive, self-affirming ways?

Asked to reflect on the material of the course, to make connections between what was read and their own experiences, one student wrote:

> The apocalyptic texts that we have read in this class have greatly affected my life. They have caused me to re-evaluate my role in life and question what I'm doing here on Earth. An apocalypse could happen sometime this year, this month, even today, so am I making my life worthwhile while I'm still here? If I know that my life could end tomorrow, I should concentrate on living a good life today.

Written a year before the events of September 11th, for most Americans such a statement would seem prophetic. But notice the turn from the profound and difficult to the package of faith freely distributed in American popular culture. Of course, this student's response represents the exact response that the writer of *Revelations* probably had in mind, particularly in the letters to the seven churches: One's actions carry with them eternal consequences, so it would be best to act according to scripture. This idea so quickly gets refashioned into a standard truism: I better lead a good life because who knows what will happen. Such moves leave a good life undefined, including a good life after the Holocaust. How is that pursuit to be reconciled with what we "know" happened?

The Dangers of Encapsulated Thinking

Framing both the problem of language and the reinscription of dominant tropes is the context of the classroom and the Academy. The dangers of "encapsulated thinking," as I'm calling it, strike at the heart of what I want to do in the classroom. Most of us strive to work against the implicit assumption within American anti-intellectual discourse that what we do in the classroom is somehow separate from the real world. Part of my purpose in teaching this course was to provide a forum where the separation of the "real-world" from the "academic world" would be exposed. Some of my students did come to see the material as simply academic, with no meaningful analogue to their lives. This was partly a consequence of the kinds of writing and thinking I asked them to do; I asked them to write about the unrepresentable in a traditional academic fashion: analysis, support, linear reasoning. I had not met, in other words, what Skorczewski rightly claims is our primary challenge as teachers: "to learn to recognize our own clichés"(236), our own "givens."

Yet even as students pronounced the topic solely academic, even as they found themselves trapped within a language that limited what they could say, many students revealed a struggle to understand and name a world that I found affirming and hopeful. When I asked my students what they thought about the material of this course, one student wrote that:

> Discussing these topics has actually worked to remove myself from these ideas. After becoming routinely involved in such topics as the apocalypse and endings, I found myself more detached from these ideas. Viewing them in an academic setting distanced myself from their concepts while at the same time I began to understand more of their complicated nature and question more of their ambiguity.

I find it interesting that this writer struggles to remove himself as the actor, removing the referent leaving only the object reflexive pronoun: "Discussing these topics . . . remove[d] myself... distanced myself." He doesn't write that the topics "distanced me," and surprisingly he does not employ the passive, i.e. he doesn't write "I was distanced." That construction and syntax make me believe that something in the writing is responsive to the trauma that Berger writes of, that this writer is trying to protect his assumptions in the face of the "tremendum of the abyss" that disavows easy assimilation, easy packaging and forces us to contend with ambiguity and complexity.

Interestingly, and perhaps redeemingly, another student seems to acknowledge that this distancing and disavowal of complexity is exactly what he wants to do. He writes that:

> I do not think that the materials of the class have affected me very much at all. . . . I guess you could say I may have taken on a narrow-minded, one-directional approach to the class, but that is how I have been raised. As a Christian, I have taken on the strict belief that I am not supposed to let other religions or cults influence me. In fact, I am supposed to shun their practices. . . . I guess the main reason that this class has not had a whole lot of meaning to me is that I have taught myself not to let such discussions influence my ideas. If I were to open my mind a little more to this idea, I may notice a strong defense.

The acknowledgment of resistance without the follow-through of change was upsetting but also hopeful. This student shows a willingness to acknowledge that the world may be different from how he had imagined it, although he hedges by writing "I guess" and "I may have taken," indicating possibility but not yet responsibility. The writer concludes with a nod towards how to respond, but then makes an equally quick move to write over it through the use of the subjunctive: "If I were to open my mind," the implication being that he will not, at least not yet. But still, to see such awareness among first-year students who hold on to belief systems sometimes because their first years are otherwise so destabilizing is remarkable.

An Ending

I find the struggle to understand my students energizing, uplifting, and enervating. It seems they work so hard to avoid what is difficult, even as they desire to make the world make sense. I think of one my students who said simply, profoundly, "I don't know how to respond to the images in the documentary [*Night and Fog*] – the bulldozer and the things that were once bodies. I don't know how." Language fails, breaks down, its inadequacy reveals the moment of comprehension. In that moment of admission, of not-knowing, there is possibility; Bernard-Donals and Glejzer tell us that "we need to teach that *what we are supposed to know we do not know*" (emphasis in original, 174). There are things we cannot know, cannot express, but that does not mean the only avenue of expression open for us is cliché. Sometimes an end is not a new beginning; sometimes it is simply an end requiring a response to Cohen's challenge that new language is needed, a language that is ugly, muddy, unrefined perhaps.

To make sense of this film, one remarkable student recalls a school trip to Dachau and her teacher, whom she simply calls Madame; she writes "Madame, my French teacher, is Jewish. While the group was waiting for everyone to come back to the meeting place, I saw her leaning against the wall . . .close enough to keep an eye on the high school kids. Which meant that she was close enough for everyone to see that she was crying. But nobody was noticing. They were talking about the other places that we would travel on this trip. And Madame was crying." And there, in the space between what she "cannot know" and the moment that she does know – her teacher crying, her own testimony to witness, her presence there and not-there – is where the importance of this class lies, where the importance of all of our classes lie: teaching students to be comfortable with the ambiguity, the failure of language, yet helping them construct ways of being in this world that are complicated, complex and capable of standing up to terrible events, capable of reacting in ways other than asking "how can they hate us so" or "why would God do this to us," and capable too of expressing the profoundness of love and joy.

Notes

[1] I first taught this course in the fall of 2000, and then again during the fall of 2001, and the spring of 2002. The responses from my students that I quote below come primarily from the fall courses of 2000/2001. Thus the presence of 9/11 cannot be denied – timing is everything, but it is not my purpose here to discuss student responses to 9/11 per se, but their treatment with / of the notion of end-times as a framing mechanism.

[2] I was impressed by my students' abilities to work with complicated text each of the three times I taught the course. They could, for instance, puzzle out the complicated narrative structure of Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony*.

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