

# Composition's New Thing: Bruno Latour and the Apocalyptic Turn

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*We live now in hard times. Not end times.*

—Jon Stewart, *The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Keep Fear Alive*

**T**hroughout its relatively brief history as a discipline, composition has taken a number of different “turns.” We have witnessed a social turn, an ethical turn, and a sophistic turn, and each of these has promised either to place the field on surer footing or, in the case of sophistic, to undermine the ground altogether. Composition now faces a somewhat paradoxical turn, one in which the ground (to reuse and recycle the metaphor) may be solid but is also corrupted. I am speaking of an *apocalyptic* turn, in which the end of the world looms ever larger in our disciplinary and pedagogical imagination. Ours is of course not the first generation to worry about the world’s end (and I hope it won’t be the last). But the field does seem to be thinking more and more about what composition ought to do in the face of serious dangers to human flourishing. A growing list of authors—including Derek Owens, Kurt Spellmeyer, Lynn Worsham, and others—share a basic perspective: economic disruption, endless violence, and, perhaps most important, environmental collapse should force us to reexamine what it means to work in the field of composition, and this reexamination should go to the very heart of what *composition* means.

The apocalyptic turn raises fundamental questions about the focus and scope of our work: what, finally, can composition do to ameliorate these threats? The most important answer to that question entails a challenge to the critical impulse that has been one of composition’s central values. Critical thinking, the aforementioned writers suggest, may finally have outlived its usefulness. As it is traditionally

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defined, critical thinking suggests a revelation: throwing down the idols and getting behind the shadows. It thus relies on the same distinction as does the cave of Plato's *Republic*, a place unfriendly to composition whether in rhetorical or poetic form. It is common to think of critical thinking (and the various forms of critical pedagogy that often encourage it) as the ability to discover the true lurking behind the false. Yet this revelatory impulse is itself apocalyptic. *Apocalypse*, after all, means "revelation" or "a lifting of the veil"—that is, a time or a moment when we will finally see through a glass clearly. Critique, in other words, operates on apocalyptic logic. Perhaps ironically, the apocalyptic turn rejects apocalyptic logic. Instead of critiquing apocalyptic discourse in order to see what is "behind" it, scholars of the apocalyptic turn urge composition to face the apocalypse itself (that is, serious dangers to human flourishing). In other words, the apocalyptic turn insists that slowing our culture's self-inflicted "progress" toward the end times requires that we get around apocalyptic logic rather than engage in it.

To further articulate that workaround for composition, I turn to Bruno Latour. I admit that finding a French theorist to solve our intellectual problems is a bit predictable. But Latour's work is particularly apt for the apocalyptic moment in composition. Since at least *We Have Never Been Modern* (English trans. 1993), Latour has made it his project to think otherwise than (not to say "outside of") the logic of Plato's cave. Latour's work also offers a post-critical take on thinking and writing about matters of public concern. Critique, Latour reminds us, depends on the cave, which always assumes that knowledge and deliberation happen on two different planes. Most striking is that Latour employs the word *composition*—a word about which our field has often been embarrassed<sup>1</sup>—to describe his post-critical way of thinking. Latour may not be a compositionist in the way we normally understand the term. Yet his expansive notion of composition can help us reimagine the field's work after the apocalyptic turn. As we will see in the next section's literature review, the writers of the apocalyptic turn are neither Chicken Littles nor devotees of Mayan chronology. Their proposition is simple: something major is happening in the world outside the academy, and the work of teaching writing ought to take that something into account. In effect, they urge on us what Marilyn Cooper has recently called a "pedagogy of responsibility" in which students understand that "their rhetoric can contribute to the effort to construct a good common world" (443). Latour's writing, I will then argue, can help us articulate a way to move composition past the apocalyptic logic of critique and closer to an apocalyptic turn toward responsibility.

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*I'm drowning here, and you're describing the water.*

—Melvin Udall in *As Good as It Gets*

Ironically, the easiest part of writing about the end of the world is finding a place to begin. The news supplies an endless number of representative anecdotes. As I write this, the Japanese tsunami disaster is twenty-four hours old. The massive underwater earthquake has now been compounded by a nuclear crisis whose effects may reach much farther than the tsunami's waves. When I first began taking notes for this piece, the Deepwater Horizon/BP oil spill would have been the best opener. Ultimately, *kairos* does not matter: there are enough global threats to occasion any essay. An oil spill the size of the Gulf Coast disaster is an everyday event in the Niger Delta, so you can always begin there. In 2010, we faced the hottest year on record, the highest Arctic temperature ever recorded, and the worst coral reef die-off since 1998. And then there's the Great Eastern Garbage Patch. Apparently, Pacific currents have swirled our trash into an island of plastic garbage ten feet deep and at least as big as Texas in the middle of the ocean. But this floating dump is not some Sargasso Sea that could, in theory, be fished from the water. It seems rather that it is simply an area in which the concentration of plastic particles is abnormally high, and the particles are small enough to be consumed by wildlife and fed into the ecosystem.<sup>2</sup>

Composition now finds itself echoing litany after litany like the one I have just offered. The brief literature review I offer in this section confirms that disaster, like language, speaks us as much as we speak it. Over ten years ago, for example, Michael Blitz and Mark Hurlbert gave us *Letters for the Living*, in which they wondered why

[. . .] our children are inheriting a desperately polluted planet, an outrageously unbalanced global economy, dramatically intensified racism, sexism, homophobia, urban squalor, a booming prison industry, mass media aimed at dulling preadolescent intellects, elected officials who have decided that it is more cost effective to allow a rise in poverty and homelessness than to make a commitment to schools and training and long-range socioeconomic justice? (3)

The authors do not offer easy solutions, choosing instead simply to appreciate the depth and breadth of the social pathologies with which our students are trying to grapple. Besides, what pedagogy could address such problems? None, it seems: "if educators everywhere are teaching and conducting research toward the understanding and remaking of culture and society, why are our culture and society so chronically unhealthy?" (3). This seemingly bootless question suggests the crisis that has occasioned the apocalyptic turn: the world is in such a state that our usual ways of talking, writing, and teaching no longer cut it. Composition faces a catch-22: it seems outrageous that composition would not address the problems that Blitz and Hurlbert list, but those problems are so outrageous that it is unlikely that composition could address them.

Composition has found itself asking this kind of question again and again. In 2001, just a couple of years after Blitz and Hurlbert, Owens gave us *Composition and*

*Sustainability*, a book that really should have been enough to scare composition studies into figuring out how we might help save the world. “Over the next century, average U.S. temperatures are expected to increase between five and ten degrees Fahrenheit, resulting in hotter cities, extreme precipitation and drought, systematic ecosystem damage, more heat waves, and shrinking coastal wetlands due to rising sea levels” (165). Unfortunately, Owens’s book was already out of date when it was published: “In the *State of World 1989*, reference was made to the 1990s as a ‘turnaround decade,’ citing scientists who believed that the future of the environment would depend on what would and would not happen in the 1990s” (12). Now another decade has passed.<sup>3</sup> Back when we still thought we might be able to reverse the effects of industrialization, Owens was already wondering whether composition in particular or education in general was equipped to handle the threat of environmental collapse. “We don’t have time to train a generation of teachers, who would train a generation of students, who a generation later will become decision-makers. That’s not an option any more. The changes have to come within a matter of years among those of us who are already making decisions” (Lester Brown; qtd. in Owens 13). The young people in Owens’s composition courses will have to live with these decisions, just as they have lived with the decisions of industrialization and capitalism. Owens hopes that his pedagogy of sustainability will ameliorate the problems students will face, but ten years ago, he could not avoid wondering whether it was already too late.

A few years after Owens’s book, Spellmeyer raised a similar set of problems in his *Arts of Living*. He offers his own litany of disasters; the only difference is that his list begins with an entirely human-made one:

Consider 9/11. Consider, too, that right now, by most estimates, species are disappearing at a rate without precedent since mammals first appeared on earth. Should global warming become a reality, we are not likely to enjoy a future of springlike weather at Christmas. Years of record drought in Afghanistan, record cold in Mongolia, record floods in Bangladesh—these may offer us a foretaste of things to come, not outright cataclysm but a slow, steady, and irreparable deterioration of the natural order. (243–44)

Like Owens, Spellmeyer wonders whether we even know how to put language and thought to what we are seeing: “the crises on my list are in some ways unprecedented, so much so that they threaten to overwhelm the conceptual resources at our disposal” (166). They also threaten our pedagogical resources. At his own institution, Spellmeyer reports, the plan appears to involve continuing traditional liberal arts education. Spellmeyer writes, “[W]e continue to believe—or at least to claim—that a knowledge of Plato, a reading of Shakespeare, a brush with current historiography [. . .] will somehow enable young Americans to make better decisions [. . .]. As far as I’m concerned, this is the sheerest superstition” (244).

A few years after *Arts of Living*, Spellmeyer's colleague Richard Miller rehearsed the same list of crises. In "The Coming Apocalypse," Miller writes, "[T]he most pressing problems of our time are all global in scope: in addition to the economic collapse, there is global climate change, the global 'war on terror,' the global energy crisis, and the ticking global population time bomb. [. . .] In such a context, it seems almost ludicrous to ask if writing has a meaningful role to play in the hot, flat, and crowded world that looms in our near future" (144). Miller had already established this apocalyptic line of thinking in his 2005 *Writing at the End of the World*, which included meditations on school shootings, smart bombs, and of course 9/11.<sup>4</sup> These crises, he argued, should force us to reassess the way we see ourselves: "As alluring as it is to dream that the intellectual can play a guiding role in the lives of others by revealing bureaucratic incoherence and inefficiency, the truth is that the world of social relations is not more responsive to the quick, penetrating 'critical intervention' than a stone is to the pounding of the rain" (*Writing* 83). Who are we supposed to be, if not the intellectuals who reveal inefficiencies to the uninitiated and then train them in the art of intervention? If this vision of the professor is no longer tenable, what vision is?

Worsham also observes a deeply troubled world for which *trauma* is the key word of our "especially catastrophic age." We are experiencing, she argues, "a collective sense of profound historical shock" because we perceive that "we live out our individual lives, more or less consciously, in the overwhelming shadow cast by the unspeakable atrocities of war, genocide, mass murder, and terrorism" (170). As with Spellmeyer, the touchstone of this collection of woes is 9/11, but Worsham adds "imperialism, racism, sexism, poverty, and crime" (170). And though it lacks reference to environmental threats, Worsham's list echoes the lamentation of the apocalyptic turn, as does her concern about composition's ability to engage with these problems. She concedes that the field's recent interest in personal narrative reflects a desire to address the time in which we live, but she worries that narrative is too invested in the liberal humanist notion of the integrated self (177). Personal writing ends up providing a "conceptual shield" that causes us to "misrecognize—and, more seriously, disavow—the crucial work that words must do in a catastrophic age" (177). Worsham describes the work in psychoanalytic terms, arguing that the "narrative fetish" of personal writing serves to hide the depth of trauma (177). Although this argument may at first glance suggest that we get behind or beneath our comforting narrative in a critical way, Worsham insists that a true reckoning with trauma will confront the "incomprehensibility" of events (178). That is, the crucial work of "post-traumatic" composition is not finally to understand, but rather to live with and within events that exceed our understanding. Thus trauma, like the apocalypse that occasions it, "presents a fundamental challenge—indeed, I would say a *fatal*—challenge, as it were—to some of the field's most cherished concepts" (172;

emphasis in original). Once again, we see the pattern of the apocalyptic turn: our world faces unprecedented threats that do not merely intrude upon our intellectual and pedagogical work, but undermine them.<sup>5</sup>

I do not mean to suggest that these authors are simply doomsayers. In fact, I see their voices as prophetic, urging composition to reckon with the world in which it lives. Their arguments, moreover, suggest an abiding faith in our field. To suggest that we ought to change is to suggest both that we can change and that our changing will have some positive effect. The only question then is the nature of that change, and here we can discern the counterintuitive cast of their argument, which ultimately suggests a turn away from critique and toward some other form of engagement. Critique's basic maneuver is captured most famously by David Bartholomae in "Inventing the University": "While most readers of \_\_\_\_ have said \_\_\_\_, a close and careful reading shows that \_\_\_\_" (641). This move makes us not problem solvers but problem creators. Echoing Bartholomae, Gerald Graff notes that professors not only "invent" problems, but also "cultivate" them (45). No doubt the habit of problematizing has its countercultural uses, especially in a culture that overvalues consensus, efficiency, and cause-and-effect narrative like that which Worsham describes. Yet as Graff notes, our problematizing habit—helpful though it may be—is likely to elicit the following response: "[A]re there not already enough problems in the world without our straining to invent new ones?" (46).<sup>6</sup>

What if the answer to this question is *yes*? This is the question of apocalyptic turn. Do we really need close and careful readings to convince ourselves that we live in hard times? What can critique do for us now? "While most readers of *the Great Eastern Garbage Patch* have said *that it's a bad idea to have a Texas-sized island of plastic floating in the Pacific*, a close and careful reading shows . . ." I do not mean to be glib, nor do I mean to be dismissive of Bartholomae's canonical essay. Of course education ought to be a critical enterprise. Besides, all of the writers of the apocalyptic turn have, at least implicitly, made the "inventing the university" move: "While most teachers of *composition* have said *that critique is the fundamental move*, a close and careful reading shows that *critique may become a trained incapacity*." The problem is not a close and careful reading itself; the problem is whether a close and careful reading must always be positioned to undermine the realities we see around us.

Owens's sustainable pedagogy, for example, looks around rather than behind or beneath. He recounts a "campus profile" exercise he was once asked to perform at an "environmental literacy" conference. Questions included the following: "In what water shed(s) is your campus situated?" "Where does the energy for electricity on your campus come from?" "Where does the majority of food from your campus come from?" (*Composition* 33). (A confession: I have no idea of the answers to these questions at my own university.) To answer these questions is not a matter of getting past our perceptions; it is rather a matter of engaging our perceptions. A turn

toward sustainability, Owens argues, has to begin by having people notice where they are (34). In a sustainable pedagogy, “[w]e become sight-seers, contemplating our relationships to the sites we live in (homes and neighborhoods), the non-sites we also work in (classrooms and workplaces [. . .]), and the imagined sites we envision for our future selves, families and communities” (143–44). In this pedagogy, eyes do not shed scales. Owens assumes that his students can plainly see the problems of their everyday lives. Instead of assuming that those problems are either mere shadows or immutable realities, Owens would link students’ everyday problems and larger social issues. Owens does not assume that his students have been fooled; instead, he assumes that “students can speak with authority about how their neighborhoods make them feel” (36). The issue is then to further develop “awareness of the conditions and limitations of one’s immediate environment” (37). The real sustainability of his pedagogy does not concern the environment so much as the connections between students’ own experiences and the social, political, and environmental problems of their communities.

Spellmeyer adopts a similar stance. Rather than believe that specialized knowledge is “the capacity to tell ‘ordinary’ people who they ‘really’ are and what their actions ‘really’ mean, independent of their own conscious thinking and doing” (*Arts* 228), Spellmeyer would prefer humanists “to connect specialized knowledge with the everyday life-world” (22). Again, his pedagogy would actually be anti-apocalyptic insofar as it would reject the revelatory logic on which the apocalypse depends. As long as we live in the hope that at some point in the future we will see face-to-face that which we have only seen through a glass darkly, Spellmeyer argues, we ignore the complexity of human experience. That complexity (and the richness it offers) cannot finally be resolved into a more manageable narrative of discovery. The pedagogy implied in *Arts of Living* and his more recent *Buddha at the Apocalypse* would therefore urge us to experience that complexity. Instead of dissecting reality, it would embrace it (*Buddha* 9). Though *Buddha* does not address composition per se, it articulates the central value of the apocalyptic turn, which lies in a rejection of the usual critical impulse. For Spellmeyer, Zen challenges our apocalyptic desire for a clear-cut resolution to complex problems (*Buddha* 10).

Miller expresses the same reservations about critical thinking: “I think work in the humanities has been both stimulated and paralyzed by the race to expose the flaws in the conceptual foundations of this or that hermeneutic system” (*Writing* 148). In place of that race, Miller celebrates the “opportunity to redefine the pedagogical function as promoting a tolerance for ambiguity, as cultivating informed curiosity, as encouraging connective thinking about multivariant real-world problems” (150). In the apocalyptic turn, contemplation, connection, and cultivation supersede critique as the discipline’s central values. Again, these apocalyptic compositionists do not reject critique outright. “Finding the limits of what we know,” continues

Miller, “is an abiding activity of higher education and an essential part of clearing space and time for future endeavors to better understand the human condition. *But equally important is the effort to get to work in that newly cleared space*” (“Apocalypse” 148; emphasis added). The question then becomes what getting to work—writing, teaching, thinking—looks like.

Worsham insists that we should conceive composition “in the broadest possible sense” rather than in the restricted sense tied to the coherent subjectivity assumed by personal writing (179–80).<sup>7</sup> Though I am not as concerned with personal writing per se as Worsham is, and though I do not employ a psychoanalytic frame, I share Worsham’s desire to extend composition beyond its familiar bounds. My project of extension relies on Latour, whose “broadest possible” idea of composition pursues a way around the old choices (rhetoric versus reality, style versus substance, the cave versus the sun) that have restricted our work for so long. This more inclusive project seems particularly important for composition, a discipline of comprehension and speaking that finds itself confronting the incomprehensible and the unspeakable. How do we compose when the composition of world within which we write is changing so rapidly? Latour’s counterintuitive answer seems to be that we make composition messier and baggier, less prone to clarity and critique, more open to complexity and even confusion. What we lose in precision, he seems to suggest, we will make up for in inclusion; what we lose in focus, we will make up for in richness.

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*It is time to compose—in all the meanings of the word, including to compose with, that is, to compromise, to care, to move slowly, with caution and precaution.*

—Bruno Latour, “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’”

Though Latour has made his name as a sociologist of science, he has recently called himself a compositionist. Not a rhetorician, and not a writer, but a compositionist, that clunky moniker that marks the members of our region of English studies. As familiar as Latour’s self-description may be, it is also etymologically radical insofar as it gets to the roots and reach of composing. In so doing, it offers an enlarged vision for our work, one that is particularly apt for our apocalyptic moment. In this section, I outline that vision, drawing not only on the “Manifesto,” but also on his other work. Having sketched a Latourian notion of composition, I then connect that notion to the apocalyptic turn I have described in the previous section.

Given his recent “entry” into the field, it is perhaps not surprising that Latour would start his “Compositionist Manifesto” with the commonplace of etymology: *com* (with) + *ponere* (to put) = composition. Yet that simplicity also invites complexity. “Even though the word ‘composition’ is a bit too long and windy,” he writes, “what is nice is that it underlines things that have to be put together (Latin *componere*)

while retaining their heterogeneity” (“An Attempt” 473–74). That heterogeneity is revealed in the word’s many cognates:

[. . .] it is connected with composure; it has clear roots in art, painting, music, theatre, and dance [. . .]; it is not too far from “compromise” and “compromising,” retaining a certain diplomatic and prudential flavor. Speaking of flavor, it carries with it the pungent but ecologically correct smell of “compost,” itself due to the active “decomposition” of many invisible agents. (474)

The word, Latour suggests, can do a great deal more work than is sometimes suggested by the usual definition of composition invoked by Worsham: “writing, literacy, and discourse as well as [. . .] the product and process of writing” (Worsham 171). Latour holds not only that composition connects art and politics, ecology and cultivation, but also that it engenders a certain calm, the sort we might need as we face the apocalypse.

Ultimately, “heterogeneity” is the key to understanding Latour’s particular idea of “putting with.” This eclectic and catholic vision reflects Latour’s understanding of public problems, which always combine “chemical reactions and political reactions” (*Modern* 1). “A single thread links the most esoteric sciences and the most sordid politics [. . .] dangers on a global scale and the impending local elections or the next board meeting” (1). From a Latourian view, the plastic clumped in the Great Eastern Garbage Patch is a combination of the “political” and the “natural,” the deliberative and the scientific. The most important problems are “hybrid” problems in which “rhetoric, textual strategies, writing, staging, semiotics—all these are really at stake, but in a new form that *has simultaneous impact on the nature of things and on the social context*, which is not reducible to the one or the other” (5; emphasis added). Latour’s idea of composition ignores what he calls the “modern constitution” in which the natural and the political, or the scientific and the social, have been imagined as strictly separate. “In the eyes of our critics the ozone hole above our heads, the moral law in our hearts, the autonomous text, may each be of interest, but only separately” (*Modern* 5).

These divisions reinscribe Plato’s cave: barnyard scramble of the disputable over here; pristine knowledge of the indisputable over there. This division is often meant to protect the beauty of the heavens from the hustle of the cave. Yet this attempt at quarantine actually undermines itself. Because it lacks any external authority (authority that can be reached only by leaving the cave), the cave’s rhetoric becomes nothing more than the exercise of power. Meanwhile, nature and science, because they refuse to enter the cave (or are prevented from doing so for their own good), cannot speak to defend themselves from misuses of their own discourse. Thus we have the familiar phenomenon of major presidential candidates using science’s caution against itself, as in, “There are some gaps in the theory of evolution, so we teach

both sides of the question.” “Why,” Latour asks, “does it burn my tongue to say that global warming is a fact whether you like it or not?” (“Critique” 227). Because when science is quarantined from politics, when the heavens are quarantined from the cave, the slightest exposure appears to cause total infection.

Getting beyond this impasse requires a composition of issues that links their science/nature to their politics/disputes. Latour insists that “a delicate shuttle” has “woven [one might say ‘composed’] together the heavens, industry, texts, souls and moral law” (*Modern* 5). He captures this weaving with another etymology, this time of a word even more mundane than composition:

Icelanders boast of having the oldest Parliament, which they call *Althing*, and you can still visit in many Scandinavian countries assembly places that are designated by the word *Ding* or *Thing*. Now, is this not extraordinary that the banal term we use for designating what is out there, unquestionably, a thing, what lies out of any dispute, out of language, is also the oldest word we all have used to designate the oldest of the sites in which our ancestors did their dealing and tried to settle their disputes? (“Critique” 233)

In this conception of “Thing,” which includes *word* and *concern*, *issue* and *fact* simultaneously, the act of composition is already woven into the fabric of thinking about matters of public concern. At the same moment, the capital-T Thing offers both an increase in reality and an increase in disputability. “Facts,” Latour writes, “have become issues.” In the capital-T Thing, no small-t thing is beyond dispute. As Latour suggests, this increase in disputability, “while somewhat terrifying at first, is also the best path to finally taking seriously the political task of establishing the continuity of all entities that make up the common world” (“An Attempt” 485).<sup>8</sup>

This idea of the Thing seems crucial for a discipline facing a turn in which the apocalypse seems inevitable. To see it as inevitable is to place it beyond dispute. I do not mean here to encourage a Panglossian attitude about the problems our society faces. Yet if we assume a dire future as a given, we risk reducing issues to facts. Latour’s composition would have us avoid this division by doing the opposite. Latour acknowledges that this work is already woven into the disciplines; writing of the sciences, he observes that they all have “-logies” or “-graphies” attached to their names (*Politics* 66). Disciplines such as biology and oceanography already cross the barrier of the cave. “Each discipline,” Latour writes, “can define itself as a complex mechanism for giving *worlds the capacity to write or to speak*, as a general way of making mute entities literate” (*Politics* 66; original emphasis). Interestingly, composition already differs from these disciplines that link language/writing to things: nothing in composition’s etymology actually suggests writing or language per se. This general meaning of “putting with” opens up the worlds to which composition can give the capacity to write or speak. Composition then becomes the most heterogeneous of disciplines “in the broadest possible sense.”

So conceived, much that is familiar in composition would have to be rethought. For instance, we have spent a lot of time thinking of ways to give students the capacity to write or speak, as though they were mute entities. We have often spoken of extending literacy to our students, of expanding the franchise to include them. If we were to follow this familiar impulse, we might produce an “apocalyptic literacy”—that is, literacy about what’s threatening the human race. Surely that would be an important project. But though it may be necessary, it is not sufficient. Unlike advocates of various forms of critical thinking, the writers of the apocalyptic turn already assume that students are capable of putting words to their experience. Just ask them who they are and where they live, and they will tell you about the problems they are facing. Thumb through Owens’s *Composition and Sustainability* or Blitz and Hurlbert’s *Letters for the Living* to see any number of examples. They write of alienating neighborhoods, crummy jobs, and boring schooling. These are not students who need to be led to the conclusion that our ways of educating are out of sync with our ways of living.

In a Latourian composition, our job—and ultimately our students’ job—would be to give their worlds the capacity to write or to speak—to make their experience and their vision part of composition’s Thing. This Latourian idea of making things speak already lurks in the apocalyptic turn. For example, Owens quotes the novelist Richard Powers on the composition of a disposable camera—“Oil from the Gulf of Mexico or North Sea Brent Blend, turned to plastic in the Republic of China [. . .] Cinnabar from Spain. Nickel and titanium from South Africa [. . .] completing the most heavily choreographed conference in existence” (qtd. in “Sustainable” 28). Owens then wonders how long it would take “to painstakingly delineate the ecological impact of a different kind of conference, like [. . .] the Conference on College Composition and Communication” (“Sustainable” 28). The prospect of such a description causes him shame, as it reveals his unsustainable life (“Sustainable” 28). I don’t quarrel with his environmental scruples (and, as a regular attendee of CCCC, I am in no position to judge them anyway). For the moment, I am more interested in asking whether Owens’s incipient assignment is an act of critique or an act of composition. One might view it as an act of critique, one that would reveal the hidden costs of human activity.<sup>9</sup> Imagining CCCC as a Thing in the Latourian sense, however, would require assembling all the delegates, not only the carbon molecules we spew, but also the students we guide based on what we learn at the conference. My point here is not that Owens is asking a bad question; rather, it is that we should answer it not by disassembling our values or assumptions, but by assembling a Thing that takes all the actors, human and nonhuman, into account.

To take another example: when I presented an earlier version of this piece, I mentioned both my impatience with critical thinking and my worry about the Great Eastern Garbage Patch. One of my co-panelists defended critical thinking with this observation: “I think the students ought to know where that plastic is coming from.”

Of course I think so, too, though I have a hard time imagining how the answer to that question is much of a mystery. In any case, I do not see answering that question as an act of critique; I see it instead as an act of composition. To find out the sources of the plastic in the Pacific Ocean is not a matter of seeing through discourse, but of gathering more discourse together. "What would critique do," asks Latour, "if it could be associated with more, not with less, with multiplication, not subtraction" ("Critique" 248). That is what it means to make the Great Eastern Garbage Patch a Thing: to add the perspectives of all human and nonhuman participants affected by our dumping.

Critique, writes Latour, "did a wonderful job of debunking prejudices, enlightening nations, and prodding minds, but [ . . . ] was predicated on the discovery of a true world of realities lying behind a veil of appearances" ("An Attempt" 474–75). To spend all one's time insisting that reality is mere shadow is to spend all one's time looking at mere shadow. Critique propels us toward an apocalypse in which reality is revealed to be a false fetter. That critical habit can sometimes be empowering; certainly there are chains that sometimes need throwing off. Yet that same critical habit can also ignore the ways in which everyday experience can debunk, enlighten, and prod. When the apocalypse—that is, the global threats we face—presents itself to us, should we dismiss it as mere appearance, or accept it as a true world of reality? If the latter, then the question becomes what we shall make of this reality—given that, as Latour writes, "It is no more possible to compose with the paraphernalia of critique than it is to cook with a seesaw" ("An Attempt" 475). Instead, we have to cook with what we use to cook. And of course composition is a kind of cooking. (Only someone who doesn't enjoy food and drink—see Socrates in the *Symposium*—would think it insulting to call something "cookery.") What comes out of cooking is not truth, not reality, but a *thing* that encompasses nature and culture, nutrition and flavor, and that has some impact on the world.

Pursuing this post-critical project will require abandoning the apocalypse's critical logic of ultimate revelation. Latour's composition does not proceed in a straight line to a clear message. Instead, Latour imagines a "*tentative and precautionary progression*" ("An Attempt" 473; emphasis in original). In *Politics of Nature*, Latour defines this progression as a kind of composition that is "collected little by little through diplomatic work." Diplomacy shifts the conversation from one about facts and truth and toward a conversation in which "the number of voices that participate in the articulation of propositions is not arbitrarily short" (247). The keywords *articulation* and *diplomacy* reveal the difficulty Latour sees in gathering the Thing. Consensus is not the primary value. Indeed, in his "Manifesto" he does not imagine forming a *cosmos* so much as a *kakosmos*, a "horrible and disgusting mess" that "is a cosmos nonetheless" ("An Attempt" 481; emphasis in original). Latour's endorsement of the mess and his embrace of disputability reveal his attitude toward composition. Even his

understanding of the word *logos* concentrates on its potential ineffectiveness: logos, he says, “in fact never speaks in a clear voice: it looks for words, it hesitates, it stammers, it *starts over*” (*Politics* 183; emphasis in original). When Latour speaks of articulation and diplomacy, he is speaking of constant revision and renegotiation. A composition should no longer be judged by how incisively it debunks, but instead by how expansively (and perhaps “sloppily”) it puts together. How could such work be assessed? We might take as our rubric Burke’s “Dialectician’s Hymn”: “Hail to Thee, Logos, / [. . .] May we be Thy delegates / In parliament assembled. / [. . .] May we give true voice / To the statements of Thy creatures. / May our spoken words speak for them, / With accuracy, / That we know precisely their rejoinders / To our utterances, / And so may correct our utterances / In the light of those rejoinders” (*Philosophy* 448).

Interestingly, Bartholomae, one of the leading proponents of composition as critique, has come to a similar conclusion: “As a faculty we do not have a way of saying to a student, ‘Make that essay a little worse, not quite so finished, a little more fragmented and confused,’ and to say this in the name of learning. The institution is designed to produce and reward mastery, not call it into question” (“What Is Composition?” 14). Calling mastery into question is another way of speaking of a Thing as Latour understands it: an assembly of so many human and nonhuman voices that progress toward consensus and clarity is perpetually interrupted. I think here of the “naysayer” role as outlined in Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein’s *They Say/I Say*. There, the naysayer is meant to address objections, to quell the voice of “doubt and panic” when a text “really begins” (74). For *They Say/I Say*, a book designed to teach the moves of critique, doubt and panic are articulated primarily to strengthen the writer’s ethos (75). For Latour, however, doubt and panic signal the moment when the text, or the Thing, is really beginning. In other words, we know we’re on to something when the essay gets harder to control.

Goaded by the spirit of critique, we have often thought that it was our job to teach how one enters the parlor (Burke, *Philosophy* 110–11). Indeed, *They Say/I Say* cites the parlor metaphor as one of its architectonic ideas, and it interprets the parlor as assuming a certain type of person: “a critical, intellectual thinker who, instead of passively sitting on the sidelines, can participate in the debates and conversations of your world in an active and empowered way” (Graff and Birkenstein 12). Surely that is a laudable goal, but it has a couple of problems. First, it assumes two and only two ways of being in the world: critical thinker or passive sitter. What appears to be “passive sitting,” however, might be what Krista Ratcliffe calls a “listening rhetoric,” one that “means listening to discourses not *for* intent but *with* intent—with the intent to understand not just the claims but the rhetorical negotiations of understanding as well” (28). Second, Graff and Birkenstein’s vision of the parlor presumes a ready and waiting assembly of listeners. But the Thing demands more. For Latour, the critic is not “the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one

who offers the participants arenas in which to gather" ("Critique" 246). Latour's vision of the critic asks us to worry less about putting our oar into the Burkean parlor and more about making sure the parlor is available at all. Writing of the recent climate change conference in Copenhagen, Latour observes that a crucial participant went uninvited: *Gaia* ("An Attempt" 479). Once again, nature was placed over there while politics happened over here. Little wonder, then, that so little progress was made. Composing the guest list of the parlor, then, is no small task.

Rejecting the modern constitution that divides nature and politics, science and rhetoric, Latour imagines a new constitution for the Thing. In Latour's vision of a bicameral gathering, the lower house does not rhetoricize while the upper house theorizes. Rather, it is the job of the lower house to ask, "How many are we?" and the upper house to ask, "Can we live together?" Latour's commandments for the lower house are twofold: "You shall not simplify the number of propositions to be taken into account in the discussion," and "You shall make sure that the number of voices that participate in the articulation of propositions is not arbitrarily short-circuited" (*Politics* 109). These are the habits of thought imagined in the apocalyptic turn, where ambiguity is not resolved but cultivated. Again, Miller urges us "to redefine the pedagogical function as promoting *a tolerance for ambiguity*, as cultivating *informed curiosity*, as encouraging *connective thinking*" (*Writing* 150; emphasis added). To open up the gathering to as many voices as possible is to risk doubt and panic, yet discord and disputability are thus signs of deliberative health.

The apocalyptic turn has already begun this work of accommodation by trying to take apocalyptic petitioners into account. Our litanies of disaster (oil spills, melting glaciers, dying reefs, exploding planes, collapsing buildings, decaying universities, floating garbage patches twice the size of Texas) represent an attempt to recognize—in both the empirical and parliamentary senses—the host of "appellant entities," those creatures and objects that wish to be part of our Thing, or composition (Latour, *Politics* 122). To accommodate these problems is not to accept them as givens, but rather to listen to them in the sense that Ratcliffe means—that is, to allow these discourses to "wash over, through, and around us and then [let] them lie there" (28). The idea of letting them lie there suggests a post-critical work that is both "real" and "rhetorical." It is real in the sense of facing reality, but it is rhetorical in the sense of allowing that reality to occasion deliberation.

The question then changes. What shall we do with these appellant entities once they are gathered? The upper house in Latour's New Constitution takes on the tasks of *hierarchization* and *institution* (*Politics* 109). Its two commandments are these: "You shall discuss the compatibility of new propositions with those which are already instituted, in such a way as to maintain them all in the same common world that will give them their legitimate place," and "Once the propositions have been instituted, you shall no longer question their legitimate presence at the heart of col-

lective life” (*Politics* 109). At first glance, the habits of hierarchization and institution may seem much less appealing than the lower house habits of inclusion and extension. Given how thoroughly we are “goaded by the spirit of hierarchy” (Burke, *Language* 16), it makes sense to check that impulse by concentrating on wider franchise. But eventually, wider franchise also demands greater accommodation. Welcoming new voices into deliberation puts demands on the old voices of deliberation. In effect, Latour assigns to the upper house the task of casuistic stretching, of introducing “new principles while theoretically remaining faithful to old principles” (Burke, *Attitudes* 229). The new does not replace the old. Instead, the new has to answer to the old, and the old has to accommodate the new. If CCCC claims literacy as our domain, that claim has to be stretched to include hearing from nonhuman entities (*Gaia*, for one) as well as human ones. CCCC has also imagined some role for itself in furthering social justice; that ideal must now be stretched to include the responsibilities of environmental stewardship. In fact, the social justice question may begin with the simple question of whether it is socially just to hold CCCC at all. Obviously, I am still thinking here of Owens’s question about composition’s annual gathering: How does one accommodate the new demands of environmental stewardship with the old demands of disciplinary maintenance and professional development? How do we casuistically stretch the mission of CCCC to include issues that once seemed outside our purview? And how would one casuistically stretch that new Thing back into the practice of teaching writing?

The answer to that last question, I think, demands that we reimagine the role of *agon* in our pedagogy. *Agon* has usually been relegated to argument even while many scholars have observed time and again that formalized argumentation is often incapable of dealing with real struggle and difference. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a single argument, no matter how well constructed, that can decide the disputes of a gathering as complex as CCCC. The best we can do is imagine a project of gathering the various human and nonhuman disputants together and a project of casuistically stretching old demands to accommodate new ones.

This kind of gathering would occasion the somewhat terrifying increase in disputability (Latour, “An Attempt” 485). But it would also make our work *composition* in the sense that Latour means it and in a sense that can sustain it. The project I am imagining here is endless. Latour insists that “the movement of composition” can never finally rest because the collective will always have an outside, an excess that will always restart the work of composition (*Politics* 123). The Thing must be constantly reconstituted. Once again, Latour seems to echo Burke, who argues that casuistic stretching will always require renewal. Casuistic stretching, Burke writes, is “beyond all possibility of ‘control by elimination.’ The best that can be done is to make its workings apparent by making casuistry *absolute* and *constant*” (*Attitudes* 230; emphasis in original). Absolute and constant suggest something other than the

apocalyptic logic of critique insofar as they suggest that no composition will ever find its ultimate revelatory form. Instead, it will find temporary moments of stasis that must always be revised and recomposed.

Ultimately, my argument is that composition finds itself in one of these moments when the Thing needs to be rethought. The writers of the apocalyptic turn observe demoralization in the field. We seem to feel a frustration with our usual pedagogical habits, a frustration occasioned by a host of new appelland entities knocking at our doors—violence, terrorism, nature, science, politics—all pointing to a general sense that the usual modes of response are unfit for present crises. I have sketched the kind of Latourian habits we might develop in response to these entities, though I remain hesitant about developing an “apocalyptic pedagogy” that would simply participate in the very apocalyptic logic it would claim to resist. Meanwhile, lest this demoralization do nothing more than indicate our gloom, we should take heart that it also signals the moment for a renewed assembly of composition. Burke would tell us as much. “The devices for ostensibly retaining allegiance to an ‘original principle’ by casuistic stretching eventually lead to demoralization, which can only be stopped by a new start” (*Attitudes* 229). If the apocalyptic compositionists are any indication, composition appears to be looking for a new start. Perhaps the best we can do is imagine composition as what Latour calls a “learning compact,” which “presupposes nothing but the common ignorance of the governors and the governed in a situation of collective experimentation” (*Politics* 243).<sup>10</sup> Faced with the unspeakable and the unimaginable, there’s little point in assuming the usual position of mastery or expertise. Rather than a pedagogical contract, then, we offer a learning compact in the hope that our ignorance about how to avert the apocalypse is actually the best argument for making it our project.

An example: earlier this year, I had a conversation with one of my first-year students about what she wanted to study. “Environmental science,” she replied. “I want to save the world.” She revealed her world-saving desire without hesitation, but she could not prevent a slight twinge of embarrassment from crossing her face, as though she knew that it was naïve to utter such statements. The question the apocalyptic turn asks is how composition wants to interpret such embarrassment. Is it evidence that the student needs a bit of critique of her obvious assumption of the liberal humanist subject position? Do I tell her that the *vir bonus* (or, in this case, the *femina bona dicendi peritus*) is a myth? Or can we follow Latour, and recognize the student as a deadly serious realist who wants to enter our academic Thing, and who has brought a companion to speak with us? Geoffrey Sirc offers a disturbing assessment of our field’s ability to answer these sorts of questions: “Despite all the lip-service we give to empowerment in our ideological curricula, we don’t really believe in the power of a composition to change the world” (10). He goes on to claim that we shield ourselves from admitting this fact by making composition “a

perpetual scene of disenchantment” (12), a field where we would teach my student to question her meta-narratives instead of teaching her how composition might help her in her self-described mission. Demoralization—a deeper emotion than disenchantment—tells us that it is time to rethink what we mean by composition (a word and a vocation I no longer want to be asked to apologize for). Let us therefore trade disenchantment for demoralization, which tells us that it is time to begin the work of composition again—always extending the concern and the franchise of our discipline’s Thing—even to the end of the world.

## NOTES

1. In *What Is English?* Peter Elbow writes, “Only children and students (and musical composers) say, ‘I’m going in the other room to write a composition’ [ . . . ]. Grown-ups or professionals call their serious writing *writing*” (138, n. 1). To be fair, Latour actually coins the word “compositionism” so that it fits the usual terms of manifestoes: communism, futurism, situationism, and so on. (“An Attempt” 473).

2. For a series of disturbing photographs on this phenomenon, see the work of Chris Jordan at [www.chrisjordan.com](http://www.chrisjordan.com).

3. Bill McKibben has called his latest book *Eaarth*, so spelled in order to convey that we are really no longer living on the same planet. A recent story in the *New York Times* reported that by 2100, Chicago will have the climate of Baton Rouge, and that the city has already begun to prepare. Or see Joel Achenbach’s “The Century of Disasters.” It would be easy to continue this list.

4. Miller’s “The Coming Apocalypse” is far more hopeful, and its title is offered as a self-conscious provocation (143).

5. For more on the connection between trauma and pedagogy, see Bloom. Witnessing the events of 9/11, she finds that she has to reconceive the textbook she is editing: “Within the week, I realized that in a changed world, a collection of readings intended to stimulate students’ reasoned discussion and critical thinking and writing had to respond to this cataclysmic event” (81). Sharon Crowley’s *Toward a Civil Discourse*, occasioned as it is by an encounter with the Left Behind series (104), could also be added to the bibliography I’m developing. Unlike the other authors, however, Crowley worries about groups who welcome the end of the world. She also retains some cautious hope that there could be a space to “disarticulate” the ideology behind religiously motivated apocalypticism. Though this sounds like a project of critique, it is rather a project of connection: “If abortion is murder,” she asks, “doesn’t murder also occur when a woman is forced by the state to bear a child to term if doing so will end her life?” (201).

6. Obviously, not every college writing teacher would recognize Graff and Bartholomae as their standard bearers. Nevertheless, Graff and Birkenstein’s *They Say/I Say*, which makes a curriculum out of the Bartholomae formula, has become a hugely popular first-year textbook, one that Bartholomae endorses (Bartholomae and Schilb, “Reconsiderations” 248). And of course, “Inventing the University” remains canonical, as evidenced by *College English*’s recent 25th anniversary commemorative interview with its author.

7. Worsham might have the most serious reservations about the project I am extrapolating from these writers. Because she is concerned that any project grounded in “lived experience” will simply shield us from the difficult work of mourning the worlds we have lost, she might blanche at any pedagogy that would make us “sightseers.” Nevertheless, she resembles Spellmeyer in her rejection of “narrative fetishism,” the desire to compose according to the values of “order, sequence, causality, coherence, and completion” (Worsham 178). Like the Zen that Spellmeyer endorses, Worsham’s idea of mourning would clear space for encounter with the unspeakable and incomprehensible (179).

8. Ancient rhetoricians came to the same conclusion about the fundamental importance of disputa-

bility. To place something beyond doubt, they argued, is to place it beyond deliberation. In *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle writes, "As to what necessarily exists or will exist or is impossible to be or to have come about, on these matters there is no deliberation" (1.4.2). Cicero, following Aristotle, writes, "all deliberation is immediately cut short when people realize that something is impossible, or when some necessity is adduced" (2.336). Quintilian echoes Cicero, writing that "necessity," by which he means "inevitability," cannot really be a part of deliberation: "where there is necessity," he writes, "there is no room for deliberation, any more than when it is certain that something is impossible. For all deliberation is about doubtful things" (III.xiii.25).

9. In addition to belonging to the apocalyptic turn, Owens also might be said to belong to eco-composition, an area of inquiry also concerned with the future facing our students and their (and our) children. I distinguish between the *apocalyptic* turn and the *ecological/ecocritical* turn because the former actually forwards the doomsday premise more forcefully than does the latter. That may be because eco-composition already takes such threats as a given. In any case, Latourian composition, especially as outlined in *Politics of Nature*, gives us a standard by which to judge eco-composition. To the extent that ecocomp wants to protect nature from politics—either to "preserve" or "appreciate" nature—it undermines the possibility of composition as Latour understands it. But when Christian Weisser, for example, wants to us "to recognize that identity emerges not only from our human relationships, but from the connections we have with other life-forms in an array of habitats," he pushes us in Latourian fashion toward crossing "a number of significant barriers," including the "dualisms of nature-culture, masculine-feminine, internal-external" (87).

10. For more on this idea, see Michel Callon, Pierre Lascoumes, and Yannick Barthe's *Acting in an Uncertain World*.

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