correspondents at large

"Education Is Our Occupation"

CELESTE LANGAN

WHEN MY BERKELEY COLLEAGUE THE POET ROBERT HASS WROTE FOR THE *NEW YORK TIMES* AN ACCOUNT OF THE OCCUPY CAL EVENT OF 9 November 2011, he described the "strange contingencies" that struck his mind (even as the police baton struck his body). Since that day, when I was arrested (the police used a technique they call a hair-pull takedown) for linking arms with students to protect tents erected in solidarity with Occupy and in defiance of the campus's no-tents policy, I too have felt those contingencies. My decision to participate was no accident; I wanted to resist the conceptual and practical attenuation of the ideal of education as a res publica. But at the time of my arrest I had not yet recognized how much Occupy resonates with issues I have made the center of my scholarly life: vagrancy, mobility, freedom. This brief essay considers the new inflection Occupy has given to my understanding of the work of education. To exercise freedom of thought is not merely to engage heterodox ideas; it is to make thinking take place and take its time. It is to refuse attempts to constrain, by regulations concerning time, place, and manner, the public exercise of thinking.

Preoccupations

In a poem titled "Resolution and Independence" (1802), William Wordsworth represents the poet as preoccupied. Despite having his spirits initially elevated by the fine weather, he's worried about his future maintenance, given the recent tendency of poets to be underemployed or worse (Robert Burns and Thomas Chatterton). He's worried about futures in general, at least in part because, like the weather, his moods seem at the mercy of systems and patterns outside his control. The figure for his preoccupation is brooding ("Over his own sweet voice the Stock-dove broods" [line 5]). At once anticipatory and gestative, retrospective and melancholy, "broods" captures the complexity with which one can occupy a present time. I suspect that a great number of scholars inhabit this mood, feeling newly vulnerable, even

CELESTE LANGAN, associate professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, is the author of *Romantic Vagrancy* (Cambridge UP, 1995) and essays on Scott, Byron, media theory, and disability studies. She is completing a book manuscript titled "Post-Napoleonism."

© 2012 BY THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.4.1010 Published online by Cambridge University Press

if tenured, to the effects of the general financial crisis on the concept of the university.

Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence" has been on my mind recently, mostly because of the peculiar question that the poet addresses to an old man he espies on the margins of a pond: "What occupation do you there pursue?" (88) Such a question, phrased in terms less formal than Wordsworth's, has been the perplexed reaction of many to the Occupy Movement. Those who support Occupy, as well as those who occupy its tents, have been besieged with versions of the question. Why are you here? What's the goal? What's the agenda? More thoughtfully: What relation does Occupy have to so-called new social movements? How does it connect with earlier actions of resistance by organized labor to capitalist exploitation?

Even adepts at reading cultural events are puzzled. Fredric Jameson recently suggested that Occupy, insofar as its (dis)organization is allied to that of the "flash mob," might ultimately be legible according to the ahistoricity of the "installation": an "assemblage of heterogeneous objects in a momentary constellation" (6). In this sense Occupy seems the uncanny double rather than the antitype of Wall Street's newer, derivative financial tools: the credit default swap and collateralized debt obligation, which have made possible the transformation of debt (the negative face of credit) into a new field for capital accumulation. At the same time, however, Jameson allowed that, in the spatial logic of postmodernity, all politics is about territory: "Whether you think of the question of Palestine . . . the politics of raw materials and extractions . . . or the problems of citizenship and immigration . . . today everything is about land" (26). The problem, it appears, is to understand the relation between this spatial dimension of Occupy—in particular its reclamation of a public sphere for political life—and the history-making agency that has been traditionally associated with work.

Get a Job

Almost as common as versions of the question "What does Occupy want?" are more virulent and dismissive varieties of "Get a job." Like my niece, who, a few days after her aunt had been arrested, celebrated on her *Facebook* page the bulldozing of the remains of the Occupy Philadelphia encampment, many consider Occupiers layabouts, the latest incarnation of the class formerly known as "those who will not work" (Mayhew) or the undeserving poor. Into the latter classification would also fall those whose impoverishment is construed as the effect of a "choice" to borrow too much for college or a home. Even the more financially secure who protest growing inequality can be dismissed for wasting their time as "community organizers" instead of being "job creators." This critical attitude toward Occupiers—the assumption that they are culpably idle and undeservedly consume taxpayer resources—has remarkable similarities to critiques of Occupy: it is politically unfocused, an event or installation that lacks purpose and wastes energy that would be better put toward concrete legislative or social ends.

These various iterations of the charge that Occupy is, like its participants, unfocused and unproductive remind me of Wordsworth's famous judgment in "Gipsies" (1807) of the "unbroken knot / Of human beings, in the self-same spot!" (lines 1–2). Although Gypsies are usually classed as vagrants, Wordsworth's Gypsies do not move; indeed, their encampment is alleged to provoke the disdain even of the stars, those avatars of deep time: "Life which the very stars reprove / As on their silent tasks they move!" (23–24). Yet Wordsworth's poem describes a form of occupation legible according to the logic neither of the quasi-military, extralegal seizure of space nor of pursuit—occupation as work, the present moment as means to a particular end.

An "unbroken knot / Of human beings, in the self-same spot" could describe Berkeley's

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.4.1010 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Sproul lawn on 9 November. Our decision to protect the Occupy encampment (versions of the "blanket walls" erected in "Gipsies") by linking arms and refusing to disperse was famously called by Chancellor Birgeneau "not non-violent" civil disobedience. The tents of Occupy have provoked state-sponsored violence weirdly disproportionate to their supposed threat to the "free movement" of citizens or to public health and safety. Why? Why should the spectacle of human beings—be they Gypsies or students—occupying space without engaging in productive labor have been so disturbing for so long?

I want to propose that *thinking* has the same form, a form illegible to capitalist accumulation. Although thinking does not require motionlessness, for Wordsworth—most famously in *The Prelude*—freedom is often represented as the capacity to "pause for choice" (14.360). In "Resolution and Independence," as in "Gipsies," motionlessness is what first attracts the poet's attention, although the interrogation ("What occupation do you there pursue?") follows on the old man's slight movement:

> At length, himself unsettling, he the pond
> Stirred with his staff, and fixedly did look
> Upon the muddy water, which he conned,
> As if he had been reading in a book. (78–81)

Here fixity, shifted from the old man's body to his look ("fixedly did look"), is explicitly identified with the scholarly activity of reading. The poem tells us that the old man has come "to gather leeches" (100), though we know from Dorothy Wordsworth's journal that, with the declining availability of leeches and the increasing frailty of his body, the leech gatherer they actually met had turned to begging and to the resale of books (23–24).

Each of these contingent details resonates in the contemporary context of Occupy. Insofar as Occupy Wall Street tents offer a visual image of the relation of finance capitalism to growing social precarity, and given the long-standing representation of creditors as leeches, it is not far-fetched to consider the encampments a way of "gathering leeches." When Occupy takes place on college campuses, it underscores the precariousness of indebted students and the dwindling of liberal arts education. No longer is mere studying of books or ponds deemed "honest maintenance" ("Resolution" 105). Like the beggar, those engaged in reading are without visible means of support. As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney remark, "Credit pursues the student, offering to match credit for debt until enough credits have piled up. But the student has a habit, a bad habit. She studies. She studies but she does not learn. If she learned, they could measure her progress, confirm her attributes, give her credit." Unless they are engaged in pursuing credits, pursuing a degree as a credential for a job that might enable them to pay back their debt, students are easily lumped with the lumpen proletariat. And we know that the professoriat too is under increased pressure to measure the productivity of education, even as the "occupation" of being a student increasingly seems like nothing more than delaying entry into the class of the un- or underemployed. But suppose we were to equate the occupation of education not with pursuit—of a degree or a job—but with the practice of freedom?

Having been asked "What occupation do you there pursue?" Wordsworth's leech gatherer responds first "with a flash of mild surprise" (90). We are surprised by his surprise, David Simpson points out, because "the obligation to account for oneself in the sphere of daily life" has become "the essence of modern democratic interaction, only slightly less aggressive than the famous Althusserian moment of interpellation, 'hey you!'" (25). But the Occupy protests may have given us a new way to understand this reaction. Perhaps the leech gatherer responds with surprise to the form of the question, to the poet's singular (but now

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.4.1010 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dominant) understanding of occupation as something not yet achieved, an object of pursuit, evoked in the temporal trajectory of the poet's initial salutation: "This morning gives us promise of a glorious day" (84). This language of promise and credit correlates with the poet's representation of the affective vicissitudes of anxiety; for fear of future poverty, he cannot inhabit the present except as guilty recreation. The leech gatherer, by contrast, represents "occupation" as both the mereness of inhabiting the earth and the enriched attention of cognition. Subsisting in thought.

The Scholar-Gipsy

The beneficiary of a private annuity that took the place of a university fellowship he disdained to pursue, Wordsworth could still express nostalgia for (or fantasize) a society and a university system that supported indigent students, who,

> errant in the quest
> Of Patron, famous school or friendly nook,
> Where, pensioned, they in shelter might sit down,
> From town to town, and through wide scattered realms
> Journeyed with ponderous folios in their hands;
> And, often, starting from some covert place,
> Saluted the chance comer on the road,
> Crying, "An obolus, a penny give
> To a poor scholar!" (*Prel.* 3.469–77)

Some at Berkeley and elsewhere have carried signs with the slogan "Education Is Our Occupation." Uniting two entities increasingly known by the terms *content provider* and *consumer* (or *debtor*), the slogan reasserts an understanding of education as one of the public goods beggared by neoliberal policies oriented toward private enterprise.

I was reminded of Wordsworth's representation of the scholar as beggar when I received notice in March that I was charged with two misdemeanor offenses for having linked arms on 9 November. Initially I confused one of the statutes I was charged with violating, California Penal Code 647c, with another statute, 647(c), a vagrancy statute amended in 1961. The vagrancy law was amended because the language of the original statute, 647(1), criminalized an identity ("is a vagrant") rather than an act: "Every person (except a California Indian) without visible means of support who has the physical ability to work, and who does not seek employment, nor labor when employment is offered to him, is a vagrant." Adopting language recommended by a University of California, Berkeley, law professor, Arthur H. Sherry, the 1961 amendment, 647(c), renamed vagrancy "disorderly conduct" ("every person who accosts other persons in any public place open to the public for the purpose of begging or soliciting alms is guilty of disorderly conduct").

I was not being charged with soliciting alms, of course—although that's one way of describing the political movement to refund public education. The title of a recent special issue of the journal *Qui Parle*, for example, *Higher Education on Its Knees*, was inspired by the popular Italian protest slogan ("L'istruzione è in ginocchio") that, as Michelle Ty points out, ambiguously uses genuflection to represent "recovery, supplication, or something else altogether" (3). But I'm intrigued by how the earlier vagrancy statute, which made unemployment a crime, seems to haunt the later statute.

The statute I was charged with violating became law in 1967, two years after the Watts riots in Los Angeles, the Selma march, and the Free Speech Movement protests at Berkeley. The bill proposing a new section, 647c, "Obstruction of Free Movement in a Public Place," was initially drafted with language remarkably similar to the antibegging statute 647(c), although it was amended as follows:

> *The people of the State of California do enact as follows:*

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.4.1010 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> SECTION 1. Section 647c is added to the Penal Code, to read:
>
> 647c. Every person who~~, while soliciting customers, patronage, sales, donations, or alms, willfully harasses, annoys,~~ *willfully and maliciously* obstructs the free movement of~~, or molests,~~ any person on any street, sidewalk, or other public place or in any place open to the public is guilty of a misdemeanor.

The change in the law no doubt responds in part to constitutional challenges concerning due process; *Fenster v. Leary* (1967), for example, held that repeated arrest for living "with no visible means of support" unreasonably punished "conduct . . . which in no way impinges on the rights or interests of others. . . ." But even as the phrase describing the *speech content* of the offending act ("soliciting . . . alms") was removed, the context of the law's enactment suggests that the formal neutrality of the law's "time, place, and manner" restriction was in fact designed to neutralize or disable political speech (see Terada).

The bill proposing 647c was supported by a letter from the presiding judge of the Los Angeles County Municipal Court, Charles H. Woodmansee, who wrote to Governor Reagan, "For more than two years, at several locations in the L.A. Judicial District, organized groups, including the Black Muslims, have persistently harassed and impeded the progress of persons on and along the walkway approaches to the buildings." According to Woodmansee, "Enforcement of the citizen's right of free movement along these walkways" was "hampered by the lack of an applicable ordinance since the property, although located in the city, is owned by the county. Under this circumstance, neither the Police Department nor the Sheriff's Office can make arrests." Hence the proposal of a new state law.

Upholding the right of free movement, the law restricts freedom of assembly and the right to occupy public space as a territory for living. Although it might be objected that inquiries into the political agenda of Occupiers are different in kind from police interrogations of people stationed in the public way "without visible means of support," I would argue that such questions reflect a narrowing of freedom and of the concept of the political. A sign at Sproul Plaza in November read, "If Money Is Speech, So Are Tents." The allusion to the 2010 decision of the United States Supreme Court granting rights of citizenship (speech) to corporations underscores one discursive function of Occupy. Exercising the right of assembly against time, place, and manner restrictions, Occupiers give new meaning to (or reclaim) the title of the plaintiff in the Supreme Court case, "Citizens United," by powerfully representing as a "corporation" a postindustrial reserve army with no place in the world except the public sphere.

Works Cited

Birgeneau, Robert J. "Message to the Campus Community about Occupy Cal." *UC Berkeley NewsCenter*. UC Regents, 10 Nov. 2011. Web. 19 Mar. 2012.

Fenster v. Leary. 229 N.E.2d 426. New York Ct. of Appeals. 1967.

Hass, Robert. "At Occupy Cal, Beat Poets Has New Meaning." *The New York Times*. New York Times, 19 Nov. 2011. Web. 19 Mar. 2012.

Jameson, Fredric. "The Aesthetics of Singularity." Avenali Lecture. Chevron Auditorium, U of California, Berkeley. 28 Feb. 2012. Address.

Langan, Celeste. "Mobility Disability." *Public Culture* 13.3 (2001): 459–84. Print.

———. *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1995. Print.

Mayhew, Henry. *London Labour and the London Poor*. New York: Penguin, 1986. Print.

Moten, Fred, and Stefano Harney. "Debt and Study." *E-Flux* 14 (2010). Web. 19 Mar. 2012.

Simpson, David. *Wordsworth, Commodification, and Social Concern: The Poetics of Modernity*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2009. Print.

Terada, Rei. "Out of Place: Free Speech, Disruption, and Student Protest." *Higher Education on Its Knees*. Spec. issue of *Qui Parle* 20.1 (2011): 251–69. Print.

Ty, Michelle. Introduction. *Higher Education on Its Knees*. Spec. issue of *Qui Parle* 20.1 (2011): 3–32. Print.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.4.1010 Published online by Cambridge University Press

West's Annotated California Codes. Egan: Thomson, 2010. Print.

Woodmansee, Charles H. Letter to Ronald Reagan. 25 July 1967. TS. Berkeley Law Lib.

Wordsworth, Dorothy. *The Grasmere Journals*. Ed. Pamela Woof. New York: Oxford UP, 1993. Print.

Wordsworth, William. "Gipsies." W. Wordsworth, *Poetical Works* 226–27.

———. *Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*. Ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire. Vol. 2. New York: Oxford UP, 1940–49. Print. 5 vols.

———. "*The Prelude* of 1850 in Fourteen Books." *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*. Ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill. New York: Norton, 1973. Print.

———. "Resolution and Independence." W. Wordsworth, *Poetical Works* 235–40.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.4.1010 Published online by Cambridge University Press