The transition from diagnosis (critical reading) of Beckett to prognosis (seeing Beckett in the world) is obstructed by a persistent Beckettian *agnosia*, an indifference to ideas and knowledge. Marcel Proust compares *À la Recherche du temps perdu* to a telescope that enables readers to bring into focus the disparate details of a world of the past, distant in both time and space. Beckett’s work, by contrast, has the reader looking into an inverted telescope, where even proximate things reappear to us as alienated and distant, reduced in size and yet not for the purpose of study. Reading Beckett does not lead the reader to an appreciation of the world but rather to its depreciation and diminution. Beckett’s work teaches us to look up from his page with the gaze of the prospector—but in reverse gear. Reality through an inverted telescope appears smaller, untranscendent, and as if the whole world were dumped into the bottom of a well—in short, a place where things are condemned to wait.

The homeless vagabonds in *Waiting for Godot* beg the question of how to stage a world down a well. Godot has been imprisoned, placed under the siege of Sarajevo, cast off with the jetsam in post-Katrina New Orleans. Under what circumstances might *Godot* be performed again? What theatrical stages are being forged within the contemporary political landscape? What new stress might be found within *Godot’s* monotony were the play to
unfold, for example, in the shadow of technological disaster, an information meltdown, a failed prediction for the world’s end, or during a workers’ strike?³

The Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 sought to call attention to the iniquities of the financial system in the United States and worldwide that benefitted a few at the expense of the many. The insight of Occupy Wall Street and related squatter communities that arose in Oakland, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, London, and other cities across the world was that marginal existence had left the margins and become the status quo. The movement’s slogan “We are the 99%” highlighted the statistical gap separating the majority from the wealth and power of the highest and slimmest tier (the 1 percent) of privileged society.

In researching this book, my goal was not to add yet another analysis to the heap of Beckett scholarship. I instead wanted to do something Beckettian, something less—to let go of analysis and see what would happen at the intersection of Godot’s “country road” with Wall Street. Despite its variegated production history and its appeal to communities in crisis, Godot had never been staged with a backdrop of financial crisis. The vagabonds resonated allegorically with displaced inhabitants of the Lower Ninth Ward, with convicts, and with people under siege, yet never with the victims of a financial tsunami, the unemployed, the financially ruined, or, in the language of the Occupy movement, the 99 percent. So in October 2011, along with Jonathan Bernstein and Harold Dean James, I coproduced Waiting for Godot in Zuccotti Park at the heart of the protest movement as a kind of “road test” for the concepts I had been developing while writing this book. Though not a play of protest, what might Godot become while unfolding in the middle of one? Would the squatters of the Occupy movement feel an affinity with Didi and Gogo? What pressure might the staging of a protest exert on the staging of a play?

As in San Quentin, Gentilly, and Sarajevo, the situation in Zuccotti Park that beckoned the production already seemed Beckettian. Addressing the global movement of capital, the protest assumed an obstinately immobile form, as if the bodies of the participants had nothing in common with the mobility and liquidity of labor, stocks, and indexes. Instead of marching in the street, the protest more closely resembled an effort to live there, in full view and subject to the vicissitudes of weather and circumstance, like vagabonds. The movement de-escalated the Gandhian tactic of passive resistance into impassive endurance or perhaps something more closely resembling the prolonged inertia seen onstage in Godot. Descriptions of the Occupiers notably sounded like unwitting descriptions of Beckett’s stage-
FIGURE 1
PROTEST SIGNS AT ZUCCOTTI PARK DURING OCCUPY WALL STREET, OCTOBER 2011
(PHOTO BY STACEY MICKELBART)
craft. Ross Douthat, for example, wrote about the “ragtag theatricality” of the movement. The parallels continued and multiplied right up to the night of November 15, when at 1 a.m., without warning, the police cleared all protesters in a very carefully planned raid under Klieg lights, arresting some who resisted. One eyewitness reports, “The sanitation department collected anything left behind and barricades were placed to limit access to the park.” The words of Molloy, Beckett’s vagabond character, come as close as any to a description for the end of the Zuccotti encampment: “The night purge is in the hands of the technicians.”

Occupy Wall Street was not just demonstrating against homelessness and the mechanisms behind it (subprime mortgages, the collapsing housing market, foreclosures), it was also demonstrating homelessness. The rags of the squatters were not mere show: in sharp contrast to previous social movements that divided across class lines, Occupy was permeable to society’s most bereft. New York City’s homeless population entered the ranks of the protest. Activist Rebecca Solnit observes, “One of the complicating factors in the Occupy movement was that so many of the thrown-away people of our society—the homeless, the marginal, the mentally ill, the addicted—came to Occupy encampments for safe sleeping space, food, and medical care. These economic refugees were generously taken in by the new civil society, having been thrown out by the old uncivil one.” Rather than “complication,” the inclusion of the homeless is a measure of the movement’s complexity. It was not the protest that integrated the homeless but vice versa: the homeless introduced the protest to the day-to-day crisis of their existence, to sleeping on pavement, hunting for food, and the unrestrained intrusion of policemen. Writer Chris Hedges claims that protesters received their “master class in occupation” and learned their tactics for survival from drifters. But even a writer as deeply sympathetic to the movement as Solnit regards the homeless less as participants and more as intruders. These outcasts do not seem to have place even within our political spectrum: they live the condition others protest.

The Occupy movement at times looked like a sit-down strike for the unemployed: they seemed to be striking against the conditions of un- or underemployment, and could do so only by enacting the vagabondage into which the 99 percent had been cast. To dramatize this, the movement raised inutility to the level of public spectacle. Zuccotti Park had neither utilitarian nor symbolic value. Occupying it did not block access to the financial centers, and the park had none of the iconic value of spaces seized in earlier protests (the president’s office at Columbia University, the ROTC headquarters, the monument at Wounded Knee). Hunkering down in the park
for four months was as absurd as occupying a stage for two acts, waiting for a character who never arrives. This has alarmed Beckett’s audiences since Godot’s 1953 debut. At the Brussels premiere of Waiting for Godot a patron yelled “Why won’t they work?” as she stormed toward the exit; “Because they don’t have time,” replied another. In these early performances the emphatic dereliction of Beckett’s figures grated on the work ethic of the audience. Not only were the figures on stage not doing anything but the play was not doing anything—and not doing anything with that fact. “Nothing to be done” signals both that there is no work to do and that much work on the nothing remains to be done (and therefore can be postponed).

Some popular objections to Beckett’s theater echo those leveled at the Occupiers. The question “Why won’t they work?” is testimony to a desire to place delinquent bodies elsewhere, to make them leave the haphazard collective in the park and disappear into solitary labor. Of course, the failure to disappear in this way, the growing absence and inadequacy of work, was what prepared the ground for the movement. But this condition does not spontaneously generate demands. Indeed, journalists took the movement to task for what Todd Gitlin called “demandlessness,” a refusal to formulate objectives that would accommodate existing political discourse and address the platforms of the major political parties. In a speech delivered at the park, Judith Butler observes similarly, “Saying there are no demands leaves your critics confused.” Likewise, Beckett replaces “demand” with “need.” His work confronts readers with an impoverished and worsening situation rather than a theme or thesis. Beckett describes the work of art as a confluence of two needs, “the being which is need and the necessity of being in need, hell of unreason from which rises the blank scream, the series of pure questions, the work of art.” The artwork’s scream is blank: need is not sublimated into protest, objection, or articulation. Readers instinctively want to make their job easier by making this scream into a demand, to make it a need for something (truth, philosophy, meaning, anything). Yet the poverty of Beckett’s work maintains only a need for need: it cannot even imagine the quenching object.

We had a busy week preparing for the performance at Zuccotti Park. We scouted the performance location, met with the improvised and fluid leadership of the Occupy movement, held a casting call for professional actors, rehearsed, found props, scoured thrift stores for costumes, and made flyers and advertising material. In turning to the Salvation Army, that limbo for castaway items, we honored a tradition for Godot performances that began at the world premiere of the play at the Babylon Theater in 1953. The props
department at the Babylon Theater did not possess an adequate suitcase for the character Lucky, which, director Roger Blin specified, should be old and battered looking. Two days before opening night, the costume lady resolved this problem by asking her husband, a garbage collector for the city of Paris, to find such a suitcase. As in the original production, the Zuccotti Godot featured abandoned objects, rather than prefabricated representations of them.

On the day of the show we walked from our rehearsal space to Zuccotti Park. Our troupe, The 99% Theater Company, entered the busy streets of New York like actors for hire, in search of a stage (rather than an author), seeking to claim a performance space, rather than be delivered to one. The actors walked to work in both costume and character, passing out flyers for the performance on the way. People stared at Lucky, a man grunting with a suitcase, a chair, and a rope around his neck. As Pozzo swung the whip, shouting “Think Pig!” “Up Pig!,” passersby were confused and alarmed.

Whatever scene we made walking down to Wall Street, upon arriving at Zuccotti Park the actors in their makeup and bowler hats did not stand out but actually blended in with the Occupy crowd. There were so many signs and performances of protest and mini-scenarios on view that we merely took a place next to everyone else. Didi carried the tree made of a few oversized hundred-dollar bills from a “Big Bucks” note pad for leaves and snapped dowels for branches. The barren money tree, which could have been devised for the protest rather than the play, aroused no astonishment.

The protest and the procession of signs and homemade statuary gave a different nuance to the blasted tree in Godot. Instead of simply designating a barren wasteland, it became accusatory, less destroyed icon than icon of destruction, like the Styrofoam drone in the photo. In the years prior to the economic collapse, money seemed indeed to grow on trees: capital, even the promise of capital, begat more capital. Labor fell out of the picture. The tree that grew in Wall Street seemed therefore to represent the breakdown of a financial illusion.

Each performance of Godot was countenanced by protesters’ signs. Didi and Gogo delivered lines such as “No use wiggling” and discussed how Godot had to consult his agents, his correspondents, his books, his bank account “before taking a decision,” while staring out into a sea of placards bearing phrases such as “Up against the Wall Street” and “I can’t afford a Politician.” Quite fittingly, our first performance of Beckett’s play took place beneath and out of reach of an enormous red sculpture titled Joie de Vivre. The performance space shifted according to the movement of the crowd standing around, many of them with signs.
Our production of *Godot* took place in a landscape scattered with written imperatives, denunciations, political puns, and lines drawn from Beckett’s text. *Godot* is both experimental and extraordinarily unperturbed, unagitated: it does not wince at the horror. The constellation of urgent messages that ringed our stage seemed defined by their collision with the deadpan expression of Beckett’s play and the elongated gesture of its emptiness. “It’s a Scandal!” uttered by Vladimir in shock at Lucky’s condition, is the only line in which the character raises his voice. Printed on a sign, this line hung over each movement on the stage.

The production revealed how Wall Street is a land of capital and for capital and as such a “no-man’s-land.” The space provided not only an uninhabitable stage for *Godot* but a uniquely inhospitable one as well. This was a protest of the Facebook era—everyone had a voice, but no one a microphone. We immersed the deamplified voices of Beckett’s characters into a setting where the prevailing logic seemed to be that if you want to be heard, get louder. It was possibly the windiest *Godot* ever: through the cavernous streets, strong breezes whipped across the park and blew an array of small street debris at the actors and across the stage. Never have the actors in a Beckett play seemed so acoustically and visually dwarfed. Their anxiety
FIGURE 3
LUCKY (DAVID YASHIN) PERFORMS MONOLOGUE NEAR "UN-REPEAL GLASS-STEAGALL"
(PHOTO BY STACEY MICKELBART)
sharpened in the shadow of the colossal financial buildings surrounding the park, so much so that at times it seemed to tear their huddle apart.

The classical themes of work and worklessness were overshadowed by the real presence of icons of capital. In this setting Pozzo cannot appear except as the incontestable boss, not of Brecht’s production (a rational capitalist) but more like one of the occasionally steamed passersby trying to get to work. Pozzo complains, “[Lucky] imagines that when I see how well he carries I’ll be tempted to keep him on in that capacity. . . . In reality he carries like a pig. It’s not his job.”15 Beckett here pegs the way the impression of usefulness (its performance) has exceeded the value of use. Lucky appears as a laborer who has taken on jobs exceeding the terms of his contract merely to keep that job. The play also shows how Vladimir and Estragon undertake their unemployment like a task, a burden. Waiting for Godot dramatizes Sisyphean labors: each activity is ended no sooner than it has begun and produces an unclear outcome—not even the wry smile Camus attributes to the man as he trudges back down the hill is possible. For Beckett’s characters the smile is only a slim consolation following the ban on laughter, a “dreadful privation.”16 Adorno’s observation that Beckett’s plays are filled with a “jargon of a universal disrespect” came out in Zuccotti Park in the owner-worker relation.17 Unlike on the Brecht stage,
there is no stable universal sense of good work as a value. The des丽-
ation of two characters for the seeming lowest of occupations resonates with
our age in which unions have suffered and a surfeit of labor makes even
humiliating labor appealing. Didi and Gogo are not the solid proletariat,
as designated within Brecht’s rewriting of the play, but rather are workers
whose labor and productivity have been outsourced. Didi and Gogo and
even Pozzo appear eager to possibly take Lucky’s place, the place of the
slave, merely because he is actually paid, albeit in bones and other scraps of
food.

Other resonances emerged within the performance itself; as in New
Orleans, certain phrases rang more determinedly in our ears. When Pozzo
says to Vladimir and Estragon, “The road is free to all,” the actor (Cezar
Williams) waved his arm toward Broadway, which ran next to the perfor-
mance space on the edge of the park and which was patrolled by New York
City police repeating “Move along!” “Keep moving!” to pedestrians gathering
to see the performance. Cezar’s improvised gesture illuminated some-
thing about that street, and simultaneously inflected a different dimension
of the “country road” in Beckett’s play. Indeed, throughout the perfor-
mance the words of the actors are punctuated and intermingled with the
words of the police. The unspoken condition for Beckett’s play, as for Wall Street, is that this road and that street are not free, are not available to all, and do not constitute a space of opportunity.

A police presence is not an unfamiliar accompaniment to productions of Godot, but the requirements of the law in relation to the Occupy production are idiosyncratic and instructive. In the Godot in Belgrade, the cops faced the exit to prevent people from entering. In San Quentin and Raiford, police faced inward to keep prisoners from escaping the auditorium. In Zuccotti Park the police cut the audience in half, forcing half of it to be immobile and the other half mobile. A police cordon created a strange moat of human traffic around the inner audience. The barricades they erected prevented newcomers from stopping for too long to peek in either at the play or the happenings inside the park. Although this must have been annoying for some of the audience, a totally supervised space is in fact perfect for a Beckett play. Guns, badges, blue uniforms, and barked orders formed the outer barrier of the production. Adorno calls walking in place “the fundamental motif of the whole of [Beckett’s] work.” The police enforced this futility of going nowhere, of being unable to stand freely and watch from the sidewalk or leave the park except at prescribed exits. (Our play unfolded not far from two men peddling stationary bikes that powered the electrical generators inside Zuccotti.) Like a performance in a prison yard, every movement of freedom is strangely insularized. The police were perhaps more vital here than they were in the other performances of this book.

The disciplinary force encircling Zuccotti Park actively transformed potential spectators of the production into bystanders, literally standing by or contiguous to the play. This mode of stand-by, even temporary, suggests a mode of witnessing already enwrapped in waiting. But this waiting is more impatient, less meditative, than the expectations cultivated in the traditional spectator. The bystander is marked by the happenstance event, an accident or an unannounced theatrical performance: nobody intends to become a bystander and one cannot purchase tickets to bystand. This simultaneous contingency and contiguity of the audience to the play enabled, however, something customarily denied to spectators: they could get involved. At the very first performance, before any lines had been uttered, an event transpired underneath the Joie de Vivre that illustrates this. Katie Schwarz, as Gogo, heartily struggles with her boot at the beginning of the play. Without a curtain to signal the start of the play, a bystander or protester walked forward to do something, to offer his help.

Each performance of Godot in this book assaults theatrical decorum in its unique way, breaching the line between the play and its surround-
ings. The dissolution of that line is never an instance of Beckett entering the world but testimony to how the world recognizes that it has become theatrical, Beckettian. At the inaugural edge of the Zuccotti Godot, at that moment when the actor is acting but has not spoken her lines, a man steps forward making an emphatic gesture of assistance. Before Katie could deliver the play’s ominous first line, the bystander discerned that something had to be done. By this empathic gesture the man became an actor not only because he had unwittingly entered the stage but because he was acting on this empathy, and thereby exceeding—as most of the occupiers sought to do—the passivity of the traditional spectator. This cleft within the spectator’s position also affected the protesters themselves, who were divided between being passive gawkers (in a protest but only there to gawk at it, to photograph it, looking for something to take home with them) and being bystanders, or subjects who intervened and risked arrest.

Transpiring almost without notice and almost before the play began, this transfigurative moment took measure of what it meant to bring this play to the protest. Not only did the context of the Occupy movement make the poverty of Beckett’s play more apparent, it created the conditions under which someone could respond to it differently, with an offer of help rather than seizing it as an opportunity for catharsis. This bystander saw a state of need on Beckett’s stage, but not the stage. His intervention threw the stage, and the play, off course. In the time I spent at Occupy Wall Street, and in spite of the loud shouts for solidarity, the songs and chants, a drum circle, and weed generously shared, this marked in fact the one time I saw someone try to help another, another who happened to be a fictional character. Alas! Nothing to be done.