

Introduction

There is, seemingly, little to say about Beckett's politics. Many interviews and memoirs portray a writer peculiarly unqualified for political activity, ill-at-ease with mundane realities and more comfortable with philosophical abstraction. Some have celebrated his apparent detachment from the political world: notably, on the occasion of Beckett's seventieth birthday, Emil Cioran paid tribute to a figure living 'parallel to time', gifted with the ability of making others 'understand history as a dimension man could have dispensed with'.¹

Such established consensus, however, flies in the face of abundant evidence to the contrary. Beckett's texts, with their numerous portrayals of violence, torture, dispossession, internment and subjugation, harbour a real political immediacy, while his notebooks, manuscripts and correspondence reveal a fine and astute observer of political symbols, attuned to the long history of political myths in the Irish Free State, Nazi Germany and France in the aftermath of the Second World War and during the Algerian War of Independence. The literary cultures in which he worked were intensely politicised, and there is little in his translations, his collaborations, the publishing and dissemination of his texts that does not carry a political charge. For the editors who represented his professional position and interests – Jérôme Lindon, Barney Rosset and John Calder – publishing came with distinctive responsibilities to defend civil liberties and freedom of expression. Their catalogues bring Beckett's texts into proximity with important turning points in political thought: the Editions de Minuit situate Beckett in the same cultural and material spheres as Leon Trotsky, Herbert Marcuse, Nelson Mandela, Henri Lefebvre or Gilles Deleuze, while Grove Press boasts works by Roger Casement, Franz Fanon, Malcolm X and Che Guevara alongside Beckett's slim volumes.

¹ Emil Cioran, 'Quelques rencontres', in *L'Herne: Samuel Beckett*, ed. Tom Bishop and Raymond Federman (Paris: L'Herne, 1976), 46.

Naturally, there are many ways of apprehending the political currency of Beckett's texts within the national and global contexts in which they were written, read and performed. In the past decade, numerous studies have explored the intricacy and multiplicity of Beckett's historical experiences, emphasising the enduring capacity of the writing to speak to circumstances marked by war, suffering and oppression. Yet the obstacles to understanding the work's political tenor have often seemed insurmountable: to discuss Beckett's relation to politics is to confront, all too often, a series of impediments to political reflection and political action. Some assumptions – that Beckett did not give interviews, had little political sentiment, was not interested in current affairs and did not sign petitions – have left a tenacious legacy, and have been compounded by a long-standing tendency to interpret the texts as expressions of a tortured psyche.

The purpose of this book is neither to assess the grounds upon which Beckett may be considered a political writer, nor to reflect on the politics of non-naturalistic forms. Beckett, who worked in different languages, cultural industries and artistic media at the same time, tends to test many of the pieties surrounding available categories of political writing – categories which are historically and culturally specific to such a degree that they often obfuscate the tensions that have commonly arisen between political activity and creative work, even for writers commonly considered as politically engaged and revolutionary. Rather, my aim is to reinscribe Beckett and his work into their political milieux. This task involves documenting the political coordinates of Beckett's bilingual *oeuvre*, and its tangential reimagining of the political histories of Ireland, France and Europe through satire, displacement, elision, substitution and imaginative appropriation. To reinscribe Beckett's career into its political milieu is also to negotiate the relation between the domain of political activity and a sphere of citizenship which, in Beckett's case, remains a mutating concept involving the inherited, the elected and the imagined. The conjunctions and disjunctions between Beckett's literary and political work are equally important, and this book pays heed to the tensions that frequently developed between Beckett's work as essayist, translator and public figure and the demands of writing, and foregrounds his shifting positions as observer and participant in diverse forms of political activism developing in France, Great Britain and Europe after the interwar years. Beckett was far more than a sardonic observer of political folly; he endorsed numerous international petitions in which the defence of freedom of speech for artists, publishers and intellectuals acted as a response to specific political urgencies, more than a simple matter of liberal principle. His contributions to petitions

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are scrutinised and contextualised here for the first time. Three different periods are brought together: the 1930s, during which Beckett's identities as writer, translator and critic were formed; the great artistic turning point known as the 'siege in the room' between 1946 and 1948,² which came with different political demands and urgencies; and the period between 1958 and 1962, marked by other kinds of political activism and a new reflection on literary and dramatic forms.

Chapter 1, 'False Starts: The "Material of Experience" and the Writing of History', considers Beckett's frustrated efforts as a historical writer and political essayist, tracing his shifting perspective on the fortunes of the Irish Left and his responses to the debates that shaped the accession of Fianna Fáil to power, the rise of the Blueshirts and the dynamics of anti-communist sentiment in the Irish Free State during the 1930s. During periods of time spent in Dublin, London, Paris and Germany, Beckett wrote politically inflected parodies inspired from eighteenth-century traditions of life writing and pamphleteering, making various attempts to integrate historical subject matter into his work, albeit with mixed results: some of these texts were abandoned or remained unpublished for decades, in keeping with his wishes. This chapter investigates the distinctive ways in which this body of work ventriloquises competing idioms in Irish political culture, interrogating the narratives of political exclusion and disaffection that are commonly deployed in discussions of Beckett's early writing. The cultures through which his political education was mediated at Trinity College Dublin and the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, his friendships and literary partnerships, and his plans to travel to Moscow and experiences in Nazi Germany are central to my discussion.

Chapter 2, 'Another War Entirely: Internationalist Politics and the Labour of Translation', explores the ways in which Beckett's political interests impacted on his translation practices, showing that his numerous translations of texts by other writers offer a fruitful terrain for charting his responses to broader mutations within anti-colonial politics and the internationalist Left. The peculiarities of Beckett's practice as 'jobbing' translator are known through the work of Sinéad Mooney, who has demonstrated that these activities are inseparable from the thematic preoccupations and the form of his self-translated texts.³ My chapter considers how the work of translation, for Beckett, was inscribed in a wider reflection on the history of empire, colonialism, social injustice and segregation, conducted not

² On the origin of 'siege in the room', see *SB*, 346, 687 n1.

³ Sinéad Mooney, *A Tongue Not Mine: Beckett and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27–34, 119–47.

only by others but also by himself as translator. Of particular importance are his contributions to *Negro: Anthology Made by Nancy Cunard, 1931–1933* (1934), an endeavour that owed much to anti-segregationist campaigns and international organisations such as the League Against Imperialism and Colonial Oppression, and Octavio Paz's *Anthology of Mexican Poetry* (1958), a work commissioned by UNESCO and indexed to rising Cold War tensions. My discussion addresses the circumstances in which these anthologies were compiled and published, the dialogues that shaped Beckett's engagement with their internationalist remit, and his shifting relation to the politicised literary cultures of Surrealism.

The Second World War did not instigate Beckett's political consciousness: this was forged through other means, notably translation. However, the war's aftermath granted him a new political identity, shaped by his connections to the new literature of the French Resistance. The subsequent chapters turn to Beckett's internationalist politics after 1945, charting the evolution of his political thinking through his struggles with historical writing and testimony. Chapter 3, 'Aftermaths: The "Siege in the Room" and the Politics of Testimony', considers how Beckett's novellas and novel trilogy render the thorny and unresolved legacies of French collaborationism, while charting their relation to literary debates about the remit of historical testimony dominated by the voices of non-Jewish survivors. 'Suite', *Mercier et Camier*, *Eleutheria*, *Molloy* and *Malone meurt* or *Malone Dies* are of particular significance to this chapter, as texts that reflect on the principles of testimony as well as the conventions of detective fiction.

Beckett's conflicted relation to the reimagining of Nazi occupation in post-war France bears upon the subjects that he addressed in the 1950s and 1960s, and upon the dramatic and prose texts he wrote during the Algerian war (1954–1962). My final chapter, 'Turning Points: Torture, Dissent and the Algerian War of Independence', focuses on the Algerian war and its impact on political activity, in Paris in particular, examining the connections between Beckett's representations of torture and guerrilla war, and wider debates about decolonisation, historical repetition and political legitimacy, which found expressions across the catalogue of the Editions de Minuit and other politically informed publications. The cultures of dissent that crystallised in France around Lindon and others ignited a profound change in Beckett's view of his own remit as a writer, and his work bears many traces of his attempts to imagine new historical transparencies, appropriate to shifting political circumstances. Looking at the fraught political contexts in which Beckett worked further illuminates his internationalist politics, revealing how, under genuine duress, the challenges to

political activism become greater than commonly acknowledged. Offering a new context for understanding *Catastrophe*, commonly perceived as Beckett's only direct political gesture, the conclusion documents his responses to political debates about censorship, freedom of expression and human rights tied to the cultural politics of the Cold War, discussing the many petitions that he endorsed during the 1970s and 1980s and the work's continued political significance.

Politics and the Making of Beckettian Myths

Since the 1950s, much attention has been paid to the structural ambiguity of Beckett's writing – more precisely, to the capacity of the Beckettian sentence to interrogate the conditions of its own possibility, and its intimacy with omission, elision and unspeakability. Maurice Blanchot was the first to scrutinise the tension between the obligation to speak and the impossibility of continuing to speak central to so many of Beckett's texts: his celebrated essay on *L'Innommable* read the novel according to its own narrative terms, since familiar literary and theoretical models failed to account for its apparent placelessness and remoteness.⁴ Following the novel's opening salvos, 'Where now? Who now?', Blanchot presented as Beckett's principal design the creation of a narrative voice divorced from recognisable political and historical parameters. A decade later, the same line acquired a different weight in notes that Theodor Adorno compiled on the novel's German counterpart: for Adorno, Beckett was engaged in a critique of solipsistic writing indebted to dialectical materialism, which also harboured a reflection on utopia complicit with the work of Ernst Bloch.⁵ From Adorno's perspective, the historicity of Beckett's work revolved around its resistance to clear-cut referents, and its apophatic and euphemistic mode conveyed a proximity to horror, war and genocide. Such reflections are part of a wider endeavour to rethink the critical value of pessimism: for Adorno as for other theorists of the Frankfurt School, pessimism was the only philosophical route available in order to interrogate contemporary irrationality.⁶ As political critique, however, Beckett's work had clear limitations: for Adorno, the very idea of Beckett 'as a key political witness' was 'ridiculous'.⁷ Following

⁴ Maurice Blanchot, 'Où maintenant? Qui maintenant?', *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* 10 (1953): 678–86.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes sur Beckett*, trans. Christophe David (Caen: Nous, 2008), 41.

⁶ See Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Towards a New Manifesto*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2011).

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', trans. Michael T. Jones, *New German Critique* 26 (1982): 125.

his study of *Endgame*, however, Adorno reconfigured the terms of the equation, reaching striking conclusions about the demise of consensual political forms, and presenting Beckett and Kafka as the only writers able to gesture towards a new political art that 'explode[s]' the strictures of socialist realism, Sartrean commitment and Brechtian technique.⁸

Many subsequent commentaries have made Beckett an attractive philosophical subject by virtue of his capacity to portray destruction and suffering. Seldom, however, have the philosophical and the political been perceived as Beckettian concerns of equal measure. Notable exceptions include Alain Badiou's reflection on Beckett's 'political tenacity' and the recent work of Slavoj Žižek, who returns to Beckett's celebrated variations on failing and going on when discussing the legacy of communism, utopian political thought and other 'lost causes'.⁹ For Žižek, Beckettian aphorisms on the inevitability of failure can offer an imaginative way back to utopian thought, and resonate with the challenges that Che Guevara and Mao Zedong faced when articulating their own political visions and doubts.

As these disparate reflections reveal, the kind of political event to which Beckett's work responds tends to evade neat associations, largely because his career was shaped by circumstances in which the domain of the political was frequently boundless, and the dichotomies between political and aesthetic reflection frequently obscure. Jacques Rancière's work sheds light on this problem: in an essay taking issue with Hannah Arendt's and Giorgio Agamben's definitions of the political sphere of human rights, Rancière excavates a different realm of political activity, and re-examines the traditional oppositions between the private individual and the public citizen. The political subject, for Rancière, is the subject who can 'put to test the power of political names, their extension and comprehension', and who has the 'capacity for staging [. . .] scenes of dissensus' (or 'putting two worlds in one and the same world').¹⁰ Politics is apprehended accordingly, as the border between the sphere of citizenship – or political life – and the sphere of private life on the one hand, and, on the other, as the 'activity that brings [that border] back into question'. Similar tensions underlie the argument developed in this book, not least because the problem of where the personal ends and the political begins shaped so many aspects of Beckett's life and artistic endeavour.

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Commitment', trans. Francis McDonagh, *New Left Review* 1, 87–8 (1974): 86, 89.

⁹ Alain Badiou, *On Beckett*, ed. Nina Power and Alberto Toscano (Manchester: Clinamen, 2003), 31; Slavoj Žižek, *In Defence of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 7, 178, 200, 351, 423.

¹⁰ Jacques Rancière, 'Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2&3 (2004): 304, 303.

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Over the course of the historical period addressed here, the field of political thought has been ceaselessly redefined, in debates frequently underscored by anxieties concerning the workings of democracy, totalitarianism, the birth and death of political utopias, and the possibility of an end point to the political. Claude Lefort, notably, has defined the political as the dynamic that circumscribes and institutes politics in the social sphere, and is 'revealed, not in what we call political activity, but in the double movement whereby the mode of institution of society appears and is obscured'. More specifically, the political appears 'in the sense that the process whereby society is ordered and unified across its divisions becomes visible. It is obscured in the sense that the locus of politics (the locus in which parties compete and in which a general agency of power takes shape and is reproduced) becomes defined as particular, while the principle which generates the overall configuration is concealed'.¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu has offered similar definitions of the duality of the political field, stressing its capacity to function 'both as a field of forces and as a field of struggles aimed at transforming the relation of forces which confers to this field its structure at any given moment'.¹² For Bourdieu, politics is an elusive force, both known and unknown, stamped by a 'blinding familiarity' that precludes a genuine understanding of the political world.¹³

Conceptualisations of politics as a totality that functions dialectically and involves shifting patterns of legibility are particularly pertinent to the diverse European moments to which Beckett's work of displacement and translation is sutured. Indeed, the literary worlds in which his political sensibility was articulated remained shaped by intractable tensions around the visibility of political activity and the legibility of political transformations. This multiplicity and simultaneity pose serious challenges to scholarly enquiry, and have pushed discussions of politics to the margins of Beckett studies. One moment is frequently invoked: Beckett's decision to join the French Resistance in September 1941, widely considered as the logical outcome of a political experience garnered in 1936 and 1937, during a formative journey through Nazi Germany. Ultimately, however, little is known about the political mechanisms that shaped Beckett's familiarity with the idioms of fascism, communism, Stalinism or the conservative Right. Since the turn of the millenium, publications clearly signposted as explorations of the political Beckett have focused on other terrains,

¹¹ Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 11.

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 171.

¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Propos sur le champ politique* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2000), 72–3.

dominated by the prevalent sense that the work's political dimensions revolve primarily around its Irishness. Beckett's fractured relation to his privileged social class, his perspective on Irish Free State politics, and the tensions contained within the work between neutrality and engagement have been prioritised in these debates.¹⁴ Various, Peter Boxall and Leslie Hill have discussed the fundamental problems inherent in outlining Beckett's political coordinates, pointing to the considerable difficulties posed by the bilinguality of the work, which forbids the construction of a stable political and historical referent to which critical readings can then be indexed.¹⁵ Beckett's fiction, Boxall remarks, 'has stood at a very peculiar, oblique angle to the cultures that have produced it', and inhabits 'a different history altogether, a history that cannot easily be slotted between 1929 and 1989'.¹⁶

In the realm of theatre, Beckett's work has also acquired its own peculiar temporality, not least because his plays have remained stubbornly embedded in politicised areas of performance practice. His legacy is strewn with paradoxes: Suzan-Lori Parks, for example, has described Beckett as someone who had an innate understanding of social and political marginalisation, on the grounds that he 'just seems so black to [her]'.¹⁷ It is largely through the performance history of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* in situations of political hardship and oppression that Beckett's name has migrated into debates about the nature of political writing. Notably, in partitioned Germany and beyond the Iron Curtain, during the 1950s and thereafter, his early plays were commonly perceived as having a stark, yet somewhat imprecise, political dimension.¹⁸ These developments grate with

¹⁴ See Peter Boxall, ed., *Beckett/Aesthetics/Politics*, spec. section, *SBTA* 9 (2000); Alan Warren Friedman, ed., 'Introduction', in *Beckett in Black and Red: The Translations for Nancy Cunard's Negro (1934)* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), i–xl; David Weisberg, *Chronicles of Disorder: Samuel Beckett and the Cultural Politics of the Modern Novel* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000); Henry Sussman and Christopher Devenney, eds., *Engagement and Indifference: Beckett and the Political* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001); Terry Eagleton, 'Political Beckett?', *New Left Review* 40 (2006): 67–74; my own *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); James McNaughton, 'The Politics of Aftermath: Beckett, Modernism, and the Free State', in *Beckett and Ireland*, ed. Seán Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 56–77; McNaughton, 'Samuel Beckett's "Echo's Bones": Politics and Entailment in the Irish Free State', *Modern Fiction Studies* 60, no. 2 (2014): 320–44.

¹⁵ Peter Boxall, 'Samuel Beckett: Towards a Political Reading', *Irish Studies Review* 10, no. 2 (2002): 159–70; Leslie Hill, '"Up the Republic!": Beckett, Writing, Politics', *MLN* 112, no. 5 (1997): 909–28.

¹⁶ Peter Boxall, *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism* (London: Continuum, 2009), 3–4.

¹⁷ Cited in Andrea Stevens, 'A Playwright Who Likes to Bang Words Together', *NYT*, 6 March 1994, 5.

¹⁸ Wilhelm Fäger, 'The First Berlin *Godot*: Beckett's Debut on the German Stage', *SBTA* 11 (2001): 57–63; Werner Huber, 'Godot, Gorba, and Glasnost: Beckett in East Germany', *SBTA* 2 (1993): 49–58;

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available models of political theatre, which tend to focus on the practices pioneered by Brecht, and foreground the unrelenting pessimism of Beckett's drama and its emphasis on absence and silence, commonly perceived as obstacles to political traction. It is fair to say that Beckett has remained a moving target in theorisations of political theatre – particularly in British contexts, where debates about the idea of political writing pose interesting questions about the continued pre-eminence of social realism. For writers such as Dennis Potter, John Arden and Edward Bond, the idea of Beckett as a political playwright was anathema, and the ruthless critiques of his work that they issued at various points from the 1960s to the 1980s were also critiques of its dissociation from naturalism. Elsewhere, numerous actors and directors have celebrated Beckett's distinctive take on hope and despair, and the capacity of his plays to give rise to transformative political allegories – in this respect, the work of the San Quentin Drama Workshop, whose work Beckett supported over the years, has proved immensely important. Some performances of *Waiting for Godot* – in particular, the bilingual Hebrew-Arabic production directed by Ilan Ronen in Haifa in 1984 and Susan Sontag's 1993 production in Sarajevo – have been celebrated for their capacity to generate political metaphors appropriate to times of great international tension.¹⁹ Such politicised interpretations emerge from a longer history of acting and directing: for Roger Blin, Beckett's first director, *En attendant Godot* always had a political remit, and all other aspects of the work stemmed from that political origin.²⁰ Ironically, one of the first to publicly acknowledge the political power of Beckett's early plays was Jean-Paul Sartre: at a conference in Bonn in 1966, he celebrated Genet, Ionesco, Adamov and Beckett as the vanguard of a new political theatre that questioned the insufficiencies of theatre itself, rather than life's absurdity.²¹ This idea was firmly at odds with Sartre's previous pronouncements on the theatre of the absurd. The position of Ernst Fischer, the Communist veteran, shifted further still; after denouncing the 'macabre idiocy' of *Endgame*,

Octavian Saiu, 'Samuel Beckett behind the Iron Curtain: The Reception in Eastern Europe', in *The International Reception of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Mark Nixon and Matthew Feldman (London: Continuum, 2009), 251–71; David Bradby, *Beckett: Waiting for Godot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 162–4.

¹⁹ Lois Oppenheim, 'Playing with Beckett's Plays: On Sontag in Sarajevo and Other Directorial Infidelities', *JoBS* 4, no. 2 (1995): 35–46; Ilan Ronen, 'Waiting for Godot as Political Theater', in *Directing Beckett*, ed. Lois Oppenheim (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 239–49; Shifra Schonmann, 'Between Text and Counter-Text: Theatre in Search of Political Meaning', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 3, no. 2 (1995): 171–80.

²⁰ Roger Blin, *Souvenirs et propos recueillis par Lynda Bellity Peskine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 87.

²¹ Jean-Paul Sartre: "Genet, Ionesco, Beckett, Adamov, etc. forment le théâtre critique", *Le Figaro Littéraire*, 26 January 1967, 2.

he revised his opinion, forcefully arguing that the play deals with exactly the same problem as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*: unfreedom.²² Ernst Bloch concurred.²³

The sense that Beckett, as a playwright, was also a political figure has sometimes given rise to unlikely exchanges; for example, when Harold Hayes, editor of *Esquire*, invited him to cover the 1968 American Democratic Convention in Chicago alongside Eugène Ionesco and Jean Genet.²⁴ Beckett and Ionesco declined; Genet, Terry Southern, William Burroughs and the war journalist John Sack penned striking reports of this legendary convention, marked by escalating protests against the Vietnam War. Such side-stepping was not unusual, yet many other anecdotes attest to Beckett's confrontations with the day-to-day demands of politics. Ultimately, however, very little is known about the histories and ideologies through which Beckett's connections with political theatre were formed. Rather, in theatre studies, much emphasis has been placed on *Catastrophe* and *What Where*, commonly described as political but in a non-specific sense. In that strand of the discussion, which is indexed to the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, 'political' tends to mean conventionally liberal, and Beckett's political identity is defined in accordance with a seemingly uprooted politics of free speech and empathy, carrying the promise of a new Western-dominated polity in which the artist's voice can act as a political force in its own right. The common emphasis on Beckett's capacity to ventriloquise contemporary liberal values has had some unfortunate side-effects, and has obscured the rich traditions of political thought that feed his work, and the longer historical span to which it responds. In fact, Beckett's relation to post-1970s liberal values only constitutes a small part of a much more difficult equation.

When reflecting on the challenges raised by Beckett's writing, scholars have tended to be somewhat more partial to the questions outlined by Blanchot than to those discussed by Adorno, and have generally avoided the granular and meandering narratives of the political. Indeed, Pascale Casanova has argued that, especially in France, Blanchot's configuration of the Beckettian voice has remained 'the sole authorized commentary', helping to 'fabricate a tailor-made Beckett, hero of "pure" criticism', who

²² Ernst Fischer, 'Das Problem der Wirklichkeit in der modernen Kunst', *Sinn und Form* 10, no. 3 (1958): 476; Fischer, *Art against Ideology*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1969), 15.

²³ Ernst Bloch, 'Kulturkommunist ohne Parteizierat: Zu Ernst Fischers 70. Geburtstag', *Die Zeit*, 4 July 1969, *Zeit Online*, www.zeit.de/1969/27/kulturkommunist-ohne-partiezierat.

²⁴ *SB*, 599; *LSB4*, 121–3; Edmund White, *Genet* (London: Picador, 1993), 581–92.