

## “A Champion of the Right to Be Alone”: Beckett’s Modernist Encounter with Rousseau

Aegyung Noh

### I. Social Subordination *à la mode* de Beckett

With its scanty cultural details Samuel Beckett’s work is often considered more an illumination of the man’s inner life than social condition. As a fledgling modernist whose aesthetic interest was centered on the interiority of human experience, Beckett put in his first novel *Murphy* (1937), “life in his mind gave him pleasure” (2). After a handful of critical attempts to lift his work from a sociopolitical vacuum in which it has dwelt,<sup>1)</sup> one still can not but concede that “Beckett’s cultural capital in the west has been amassed on the back of his apoliticism” (Boxall 208). Yet, if “the *raison d’être* of politics is freedom,” as Hannah Arendt’s well-known aphorism goes, the slaves and minions, created by the seemingly apolitical writer and harboring an aspiration to social freedom, seem to

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1) For comprehensive political approaches to Beckett’s work, see Marius Buning et al., eds.; Henry Sussman and Christopher Devenney; David Weisberg; Tyrus Miller; and Stephen Watt.

embody a certain political statement to the modern world. Vladimir and Estragon to Godot, Lucky to Pozzo (*Waiting for Godot*, 1953), Clov to Hamm (*Endgame*, 1957), and Protagonist to Director (*Catastrophe*, 1982), his dramatic personas are subjugated conspicuously suffering from hierarchical social relations.

The question is what precisely is the nature of this subordination. Is any Marxist notion of class conflict, for instance, invested in it? The materialistic masters and their lower hands in *Godot* and *Endgame* invited Marxist comments: Henry Hewes named Pozzo a Capitalist-Aristocrat, and Lucky a Labor-Proletariat; Seán Golden and Charles Lyons discover a similar Marxist dichotomy in the relationship between Hamm and Clov. A “veiled civil war” (444) between the capitalist and the proletariat which Golden detects in Beckett’s representation of social subordination, however, hardly sustains a hostile tension it requires as *Endgame* ends with Clov sticking with Hamm even though the latter is almost drained of his tyrannical power and material resource. A humanized tyrant, and a slave who lacks a motivation to free himself are again presented in the second act of *Godot*: Lucky still remains a slave, but Pozzo, going blind and much more debilitated than before, can not go on without the other’s lead. Colin Duckworth observes more harshness in the English Pozzo than its French counterpart, but it is significant, he says, that Beckett “opted for the softer and more sympathetic Pozzo” (190).

Beckett’s juggle with Marxist master-slave dialectic surfaces again in the novel *Murphy* wherein its titular protagonist seeks employment in what the novel names “slave-markets” (77). His job search is prompted by a distasteful prospect that Celia, a woman he came to love, may otherwise have to resume prostitution to make their living, which means “no more music” in his life. A vague hatred for capitalist greed emerges as Murphy’s feeling is related about having a job: “For what was working for a living but a procuring and a pimping for the money-bags, one’s lecherous tyrants the money-bags, so that they might breed” (76). Yet largely his class-consciousness is not so much of an issue as his aversion to trading away his freedom and individuality by registering himself in a collective labor market:

Murphy's prediction is that "livelihood would destroy one or two or all three of his life's goods" (67), which include his propensity to "torpor" and "remaining still." The novel's reference to "slave" is more precisely grounded on Murphy's abhorrence of negotiating his autonomous existence by reinventing himself as "a man of the world" (65), which his lover desires him to be, than on the Marxist concept of social class.

Beckett's short story "The End" (1955) clinches his skeptical posture over Marxist historical optimism. A vagrant panhandler, the story's narrator confronts a loud political orator on a street. While his way of living, being "this down and out . . . this leftover," may fall into a social station which the other's political cause serves for, he only grumbles, "Union . . . brothers . . . Marx . . . capital . . . bread and butter . . . love. It was all Greek to me" (94). Upon the orator's inquiry about whose "fault" it is that he lives such a low life, he just departs from the site dismissing the other as a "lunatic":

So I took off the rag, pocketed the few coins I had earned, untied the board, folded it and put it under my arm. Do you hear me, you crucified bastard! cried the orator. Then I went away, although it was still light. . . . He must have been a religious fanatic, I could find no other explanation. Perhaps he was an escaped lunatic. (95)

Overall, Marx's formula of social structure and class-consciousness fits little with Beckett's design of social subordination, which opens up another interpretive possibility truer to the writer's epistemological root in Modernism: that his portrayal of the man's subordination perhaps takes issue with the autonomous individual enslaved to the system of society which mandates the submission of personal instincts and desires to the greater laws of social collectivism.

## II. In Defense of “the Right to Be Alone”: Beckett’s Modernist Encounter with Rousseau

“Liberty of the individual is not a benefit of culture” (27), that is, of a social life, as Freud put it in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). The most fundamental arch political enemy of modernist writers like Beckett<sup>2)</sup> was hardly the partisan politics that polarized the first half of the twentieth-century, for the common target of their cultural battle was rather a totalizing and potentially totalitarian drive lurking in the culture of European bourgeois states. Of this anarchic bent in Modernism, Raymond Williams states in *The Politics of Modernism* (1989): “it is a striking characteristic of several movements within both Modernism and avant-garde that rejection of the existing social order and its culture was supported and even directly expressed . . .” (58).<sup>3)</sup>

It appears that Beckett pulled a certain moral support for his own anarchic penchant as a modernist from the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose autobiographical writings and political treatises probe a crossroads where the concerns of subjectivity and introspection clash with the formative principles of society. The discord between the individual and society as Rousseau scrutinized can be sampled at its best in a quote from his autobiographical book *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782):

The conclusion I can draw from all these reflections is that I have never been truly fitted for social life, where there is nothing but irksome duty and obligation, and that my independent character has always made it impossible for me to submit to the constraints which must be accepted by anyone who wishes

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2) Beckett is often labelled as a late/last modernist whose later works span the postmodern era.

3) David Weir points to an abstract quality of the social order which modernist artists were opposed to. The “bohemian” modernists alienated themselves from it without necessarily articulating the exact social condition which brought such alienation. See the introduction to Weir’s *Anarchy and Culture: The Aesthetic Politics of Modernism* (1997).

to live among men. As long as I act freely I am good and do nothing but good, but as soon as I feel the yoke of necessity or human society I become rebellious, or rather recalcitrant, and then I am of no account. (103)

Beckett reportedly relished reading the book along with Rousseau’s another autobiography, *Confessions* (1781), praising him “as a champion of the right to be alone and as an authentically tragic figure” in a letter sent to his friend Thomas MacGreevy dated 16 Sept. 1934, which Beckett’s biographer James Knowlson informs contains a “remarkable” critique of the philosopher (660). Beckett read his writings extensively. Beside the autobiographies, he read other works, including *Émile, or on Education* (1762), a fact known through my personal correspondence with Knowlson. Having once confessed that he “seem to recuperate something in the silence and solitude” (Knowlson 353), Beckett may have gotten from the philosopher a sort of moral support and philosophical rationale for “the right to be alone,” a modernist claim to autonomous solipsism, which he often depicted in his early works as sieged by outside intruders and the calls of society.<sup>4)</sup>

Unlike his contemporary philosophers of Enlightenment, whose positive outlook on the Newtonian development of civilization was rooted in their unconditional faith in men’s rational power, Rousseau held a dark vision that this human faculty had been detrimental to the history of civilization ultimately serving to leave men subject to “chains everywhere” (*On Social Contract* 85) and dependent on a collective system for their survival. As a predecessor to Freud’s grim study of civilization and its repressive operation on the instinctive and natural side of men in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality among Men* (1755), an anthropological speculation on the formation of society and how it began subjugating a natural man’s liberty to the system of social dependence and servitude, claims the man’s unhappiness and discontent originated in the very first moment of abandoning his natural

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4) There has been one study associating Beckett with Rousseau: Elisabeth Marie Loevlie’s *Literary Silences in Pascal, Rousseau, and Beckett* (2003) explores their literary employment of silence.

independence for a collective mode of life:

There is, I feel, an age at which an individual man would like to remain; you shall seek the age at which you would have desired your species to remain. Discontent with your present state, for reasons which promise still greater unhappiness for your unfortunate posterity, perhaps you would like to have the power to go back, and this sentiment will celebrate your early ancestors, criticize your contemporaries, and frighten those who will have the misfortune to follow you. (10)

Rousseau's autobiographies which Beckett enjoyed reading add a personal color to this theme of the natural man's loss of independence and freedom in social life as explicated in more formal terms in *Discourse* and *On Social Contract or Principles of Political Right* (1762). He writes in *The Confessions* that there lies "a seed of indignation in my heart against our absurd civil institutions, whereby the real welfare of the public and true justice are always sacrificed to some kind of apparent order, which is in reality detrimental to all order, and which merely gives the sanction of public authority to the oppression of the weak and iniquity of the strong" (306). It is surely from the standpoint of his contemporary society that he condemned a social hierarchy wherein the weaker were subordinated to the stronger, but, reading the autobiography in tandem with *Discourse*, one can realize the true target of his critique is in fact society in itself than its stratified structure.

Social oppression is not incurred among savages who hold little notion of possession, which Rousseau blames as an origin of social inequality, and hence no dependence and slavery for them. Slavery was born in the formation of society, in its institutionalization of private possession and the dependence of the have-not on the have. Yet Rousseau's real assault is not on the conflict or war between classes but society itself which gave birth to such unfortunate dependence. His conception of society in *Discourse*, that it is a *matrix* giving rise to social domination and servitude, looks like a more apt frame of reference for Beckett's portrayals of slave-master dialectic than Marx's, which I suggested earlier fails to account for the

want of class-consciousness in the social inferiors characterized by the writer. Beckett’s design of social subordination as a no-exit quandary does not so much give the nod to Marxist optimism about class struggle as to the system of inequality as an unescapable outcome of the formation of society as explicated by Rousseau. “Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains” (*On Social Contract* 85), Rousseau proclaims about a yoke of slavery passed down to generations throughout history. It is not only slaves “in chains” though: he claims that “anyone who thinks himself the master of others is no less a slave than they” (*On Social Contract* 85) as one must rely on the others’ service. This view resolves what Marx’s theory could hardly explain in Beckett’s work: a Marxist class-consciousness lacking in his slaves and above all, an ironic pathos invested in the characterization of Pozzo and Hamm, the once cruel but now decrepit masters who gradually deteriorate just like their inferior partners. The “chains” of society do not only choke Lucky and Clov, but also their blind masters in desperate need for the others’ sight and service. It is simply because masters and slaves subsist on mutual dependence: “his fellowmen, whose slave he becomes, in a sense, even in becoming their master; rich, he needs their services; poor, he needs their help” (*Discourse* 42).

“Voluntary loneliness, isolation from others, is the readiest safeguard against the unhappiness that may arise out of human relations,” Freud said (12), and Rousseau, to stay away from the crushing “chains” of society, settled in the remote country far from Paris in his last years. What he needed was a near solitude surrounded by his companion Thérèse and a very small group of people congenial to his heart. His seclusion followed his personal longing to regain a sense of independence, which was hardly permitted and even worse, impaired while living in the city especially due to economic dependence and servitude he was unavoidably subject to as a man of little wealth and resource. He was also very much defeated by the “fear of making social blunders” in the fashionable society of Paris (*Confessions* 343). But his seeking for solitude offended his acquaintances in the city who, out of jealousy, tenaciously attempted to drag him out of his seclusion. Beckett named Rousseau “an authentically tragic figure” perhaps for

having had to suffer because of his voluntary isolation from the social majority. A dissension unavoidably followed between his individualistic ideal and that of Enlightenment. Derision poured upon him, mostly from the Encyclopaedists including Denis Diderot,<sup>5)</sup> who condemned in his play *Le Fils Naturel* (*The Natural Son*, 1757) that “only the wicked man is alone” (qtd. in *Confessions* 423).

Nowhere is Rousseau’s lament on the loss of a natural man’s independence in society more compellingly couched than in *Émile*, a treatise on the education of youth. To become a “citizen” implies an exchange of one’s natural right to independence and uniqueness for civic identities and duties. The man is hounded by Freudian “discontents” consequently, hung between his personal desires and social duties:

The natural man lives for himself; he is the unit, the whole, dependent only on himself and on his like. The citizen is but the numerator of a fraction, whose value depends on its denominator; his value depends upon the whole, that is, on the community. Good social institutions are those best fitted to make a man unnatural, to exchange his independence for dependence, to merge the unit in the group, so that he no longer regards himself as one, but as a part of the whole, and is only conscious of the common life. . . . He who would preserve the supremacy of natural feelings in social life knows not what he asks. Ever at war with himself, hesitating between his wishes and his duties, he will be neither a man nor a citizen. He will be of no use to himself nor to others. He will be a man of our day, a Frenchman, an Englishman, one of the great middle class. (*Émile* 7-8)

The dilemma of the natural man situated in society as scrutinized here is also a concern of moment to Beckett’s modernist characters whose necessity to be alone is often compromised by the intrusion of society. A clear example is *Eleuthéria*, the writer’s aborted French play from 1947 which was posthumously published in

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5) The French sect of Enlightenment philosophers of the eighteenth-century are commonly nicknamed Encyclopaedists because of their collaborative production of *Encyclopédie* (1772) under the initiative of Diderot.



controversy translated in English in 1995. The play centers around some unsuccessful attempts of a family and the people of a community to drag a lone young man outside of his den. Victor Krap is the play’s reclusive protagonist in conflict with his family and social acquaintances. Similar to Stephen who refuses to pray for her mother at her deathbed in *Ulysses* (1922), Victor refuses to attend his father’s funeral denying his familial bond and filial obligation. In reflection of the Greek origin of the play’s title, meaning *freedom*, he craves “freedom . . . to do nothing” (89), a state of inertia and stasis, which is very close to the protagonist’s prime need in *Murphy*. Meanwhile, Victor’s family and the people in his neighborhood make nagging attempts to drag him out of seclusion into the social scene, a déjà vu of the social interruptions to Rousseau’s pursuit of independence and solitude.

A main conflict in the play is between Victor’s defense of his right to be alone and a social pressure to pull him back to the state of normalcy. Beyond “the order of things” (159) and hardly accepted by the norms of society, Victor’s seclusion does not only perturb his family but it also agitates the people in his community. In Act III, when the Audience joins the Glazier in interrogating Victor as to why he has secluded himself, Victor condemns that their collective demand on him is prompted by their perception of his difference:

Victor: My family, my fiancée, my friends, maybe it’s normal, what is called normal, for them to be sinking their teeth into me. But you? You’re outsiders. I don’t know you. What is it to you, how I live? And you are not the first. For as long as I’ve been living this way, for two years, so you say, I’ve been a prey to strangers. . . . But why this sudden rage to understand when it concerns a life like mine? . . . The saints, the madman, the martyresses, the deathrow inmates, that doesn’t trouble you, it’s within the order of things. They are outsiders, you will never be of their party, at least you hope so. You are not begrudging of them. . . . Would you be dead set on understanding me, on vindicating me, on getting me integrated, if you felt me deep down to be one of your kind? . . . But you feel there is something different, that my life is essentially other than yours. . . . (158-61)

The interrogation by outsiders, their demand on Victor to explain himself, is reminiscent of a political inquisition, since they even debate the use of a pincer to open his mouth, or Harold Pinter's comic menace via a torrent of random questions poured upon a victim: "Why have you left your family? Your fiancée? Your amusements? Your labors? Why are you leading this life? What is your goal? What are your intentions?" (156) Something close to a totalitarian impulse is under way in their tenacity to standardize his way of living: people with otherwise irreconcilable differences are unified under a single banner to draw a private man out into a social space. The vulnerability of a private space to an outer invasion is apparent in the play's stage direction which stipulates no visible but only an imaginary partition between Krap family's parlor where people gather, and Victor's private den. In fact, community, friends, and family can easily unlock the rooms where Beckett's recluses shut themselves in. It seems not a coincidence that both Murphy (*Murphy*) and Victor have problems with the locking devices of their rooms easily allowing the outsiders to intrude on their privacy.

Modernity replaced the bonds of feudal slavery with subordination to social norms and regulations. Being alone and living outside collective norms becomes a target of correction. Victor's individualism, which is quintessentially modernist in spirit, is tyrannized by a coercive collectivism bolstering the culture of modern bourgeois society. This is how Beckett demonstrated his politics of Modernism. He may have discovered its defense in his encounter with Rousseau's conceptualization of the function of society and civilization whereby the natural independent man is subordinated to social duties, dependence, and servitude, and thus trapped in a limbo between the pursuit of his own desires and the calls of society.

### III. Modernist Retrospect of Rousseau

Rousseau's grim vision of social life is that there is a price to pay for becoming a "citizen": one's natural uniqueness and freedom. The inherent sentiment here

approximates to the anarchic and individualistic temperament of Modernism than the metaphysics of collectivism displayed by Rousseau’s eighteenth-century contemporaries. His pseudo-modernist character, which Beckett may have greatly relished discovering, is loud and clear in the first part of *Confessions*: “But I am made unlike anyone I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the world. I am no better, but at least I am different” (17). Reading more of Rousseau, one finds his pseudo-modernist preoccupation with the uniqueness of the individual and hostile stance against society. Not only that, Rousseau’s own circumstance as a Genevese exile reveals extraordinary overlaps with a typical modernist’s that Williams describes in *The Politics of Modernism*: a wandering exile isolated in his private space who partook in an “intense singular narrative of unsettlement, homelessness, solitude and impoverished dependence: the lonely writer gazing down on the unknowable city from his shabby department” (34). Rousseau wrote of his status very similarly to this description in *Confessions*: “Alone, a foreigner, isolated, without family or backing, holding to nothing but my principles and my duties, I fearlessly followed the paths of uprightness, neither flattering nor favoring anyone at the expense of justice and truth” (456). Again, a similar circumstance, feeling, and determination Beckett went through when he departed from Ireland to settle and write in the modernist capital Paris in the 1930s. Despite a historical distance between them, there are echoes and reflections of each other between Rousseau’s pursuit of individual uniqueness and independence and Beckett’s modernist search for aesthetic autonomy and personal freedom.

A related point of reference to note here is a Rousseau as remarked by James Joyce. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Stephen, a self-designated “only man” in his school “that has an individual mind,” names Rousseau an “emotional man” (200) denoting the influence that his emotionally candid autobiographies had on the rise of Romanticism. But more importantly, Stephen establishes a subtle connection between his “individual mind” and the philosopher’s effusive take on his ideals of independence and individualism. In addition to Beckett’s high regard for Rousseau as “a champion of the right to be alone,”

Joyce's cordial reference to him in the novel bestows a modernist dimension or quality upon the philosopher though anachronistically so.

(Korea University)

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**Abstract**

“A Champion of the Right to Be Alone”:  
Beckett’s Modernist Encounter with Rousseau

Aegyung Noh

Samuel Beckett reportedly read Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s autobiographies, *Confessions* (1781) and *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782), praising him “as a champion of the right to be alone and as an authentically tragic figure” in a letter sent to his friend Thomas MacGreevy. James Knowlson tells in his biography that it contains a “remarkable” critique of the philosopher. Reading Beckett’s stories and plays along with Rousseau’s autobiographies and political writings, this article proposes that the writer may have gotten from the philosopher a moral support and philosophical rationale for “the right to be alone”—a modernist claim to autonomous solipsism which he depicted in his work as sieged by the calls of outside intruders and society. The discord between a reclusive individual and society is a key motif to Beckett’s reflection of the individualist politics of Modernism, a defense of which he may have discovered in Rousseau’s conceptualization of subjectivity in conflict with the formative principles of society. In addition, Rousseau’s idea of society, that it gives rise to the inextricable chains of social domination and servitude, and of slavery, that it should be applied to both masters and slaves due to their mutual dependence, offers a better frame of reference than Marx’s for Beckett’s representation of social subordination as an insoluble impasse.

■ **Key words** : Samuel Beckett, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, modernist solipsism, social subordination, modernist politics

(사무엘 벤키, 장-자끄 루소, 자기 침잠, 사회적 종속관계, 모더니스트 정치성)

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