Romanticism and Korea: A Missed Encounter?

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This essay is to address the question of transnational implications of Romanticism as it has been adopted by Korea\(^1\) since the early 1920's. Romanticism, an artistic and cultural movement in late 18\(^{th}\) and early 19\(^{th}\) century Europe,\(^2\) may be one of the most important foreign entities Korea has interacted with on her way to modernization and is, as will be illustrated below, a notion that is still playing a significant role in the shaping of modern Korea. In line with other critical attempts to understand the implications of this cross-national encounter of Romanticism and Korea in multifarious fields,\(^3\) this  

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1) In this essay, 'Korea' refers to the nation that existed as the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea under a Japanese colonial rule in 1920's but has succeeded it after declaring independence in 1945.
2) “Romanticism” is a controversial term. In addition to the controversy over the definition of the term, the terms, as capitalized, refers to the specific historical period Romantic Movement and, as uncapsilized, to certain attitudes and intellectual orientations that were centralized during the romantic period but recur throughout history. The thing Korean literary men adopted in 1920's was Romanticism with a goal of flourish of a new artistic movement in their own country. In this essay, I follow a latest tendency of de-capitalizing the term in a derivative form such as “romantic” except when referring to the historically specific period.
essay will propose a new perspective on the subject with a focus on literary and cinematic texts by attending not only on the historical realities around the encounter but on the mode, that of a “self-shattering” disruption in my view, that a historically identifiable entity encounters a foreign one.

For the proposed purpose, this essay starts with two premises. First, it is premised that the tendency in discussing transnational implications of Romanticism in Korea has been to say that the encounter of the two different entities is a missed one in the sense that something has misfired in the course of their cross-national interaction. The second premise is that, independent of its truthfulness, a tendency as a cultural outcome is symptomatic of the uniqueness in the history of a particular cultural phenomenon. If the encounter of Romanticism and Korea tends to be understood as being missed, the negativity in the critical tendency signifies more or less of what is unique in the history of the encounter, if not directly explicating the history itself. So the negativity, as such, needs to be understood in its depth level, the level of its structure as a hidden cause of the directly experienced phenomenon. This essay aims to uncover the very underlying structure around which the history of the transnational encounter of Romanticism and Korea has revolved particularly as

3) The relation of Romanticism to Korean society today is being studied by scholars of many different fields including not only arts but architecture, tourism, economics, politics, and fashion. For example, Sun Woo Lee examines in his doctoral thesis the influence of Romanticism on Korean housing culture. See Sun Woo Lee, A Study on the Romanticism in Korean Housing: Focused on Brand Apartment since 1990, Seoul: Yonsei University, 2008.

4) Not just in this essay but in romantic discourses in general, negativity is a very important concept. Starting with a little mechanical sense of the term here, I will develop it in a more complex context by drawing on different critical theories. One common thing to those theories is an element of non-self as initially articulated by John Keats through the notion of “negative capability.” As always, the point lies in the dialectic of annihilated selfhood and worldly objectivity.
it has been understood in terms of being missed.

As regards criticisms on the Korean adoption of Romanticism, the theme of misfiring seems definable in three ways. First, there is an interpretation problem. For the very practical reason that the romantic texts need to be translated into Korean to be understood by Korean people, the criticism of Romanticism in Korea is far less free of interpretive disputes on the definition of Romanticism. This problem aggravates because it was via Japan that Korea started adopting Romanticism during the colonial era and for that reason some of the texts in European Romanticism had to go through double translations from the original European languages through Japanese into Korean. In the book Why to Discuss Romanticism Today, Jin-Soo Yi the author initially sets a goal of discussing a current implication of Romanticism in Korea. And yet, as he starts his discussion with a correct definition of Romanticism, contrary to the proposed aim, the writing as a whole turns into a discussion of correct understanding of the original texts, which is doomed to misfire in effect. What is more, Koreans have not discovered yet their own translative term for “the romantic” in Romanticism. There is only a literal translation of it, “rangman” (the Korean sound for the Chinese literal translation of “roman” in Romanticism). It is as if one has only the name “it” for a concept. This lack of a corresponding terminology troubles Koreans as a talisman of conceptual ambiguity and, in my view, compounds the superficiality of the term even more with each loose use.

The second defining term of misfiring can be found in the criticism of romantic ideology of internalization, which gains new voices in contemporary philosophies of deconstruction, feminism, and new historicism. To the perspective of deconstruction which is extremely wary of signifying closure of

representational practices, the “visionary” sect of Romanticism would look self-duped6) and, on the other hand, feminism and new historicism, which are more ideologically oriented, tend to criticize Romanticism for its macho ideology and lack of ideology each.7) Put into an international context, this kind of negative stance in contemporary criticisms on Romanticism implies that Korea has adopted a bad ideology which would do no better than to imprison Korean historical consciousness into a self-mirroring cell of language.

For testimony, one may refer to the sentiments of melancholy and decadence governing the early Korean romantic poems like “A Manifesto of Emptiness” and “The Altar of Ruins” by Sang-Sun Auh, “To My Bedroom” by Sang-Hwa Yi, and “A Sickroom Woven of Moonlight” by Young-Hee Park.8) In these poems, not just do the titles themselves convey unreserved pathology but the pathology, understood as containing the potentiality of resistive emotional aberrations from social status quo in some of English romantic poems,9)


8) English translations of the Korean poems are my own except that of Sang-Hwa Yi's, which is from Jaehoon Joyce Kim, sel & trans., Master Poems from Modern Korea Since 1920: An Anthology of Modern Korean Poetry, Seoul: The Si-sa-yong-o-sa Publishers, 1980.

seldom draws into historical productivity. In “A Manifesto of Emptiness,” the poet, losing faith in humanity and God, wishes even the sentiment of emptiness, vain to himself, to die away. In “to My Bedroom,” the poet (an activist in reality in the Anti-Conventional School) invites Madonna the Muse to his bedroom, “a cave of resurrection” that is, however, “timeless as a boyish heart” and should be reached “before the fog breaks away.”

Thirdly, and connected to the second, the post-colonial critique of Romanticism extends the theme of misfiring. Associated as it has been with the grounding of an autonomous form of subjectivity, Romanticism is now seen as “the contact zones between Europe and its subordinated others.”

The historical coincidence of modernization, which is synonymous with Westernization in most non-Western countries, and Korean adoption of Romanticism seems to support the view that Romanticism has played a promotional role in colonization of Korea by the West.

What is ironical in this critical tendency is that while it is largely Western scholars who charge Romanticism with an imperial will, a historical reality in Korea is that the derivative term, “rangman,” still experienced by Koreans as a term that generally implies what is Western, has become a broadly naturalized part of the Korean language. The *Yonsei Korean Dictionary* contains six entries for the term and we can see that the term is in wide use in modern Korea. For example, a TV show features a middle-aged man in Korean traditional costume touring around a small village in southern Korea with the mission of exploring traditional cuisine there. Interrupting his report, the narrator comments that the man takes a break at times “to enjoy rangman,”


11) They include "rangman," "rangmanjeok (romantic)," "rangmanjooui (romanticism)," "rangmanjoouija (romanticist)," and "rangmanpha (the romantic school)."
by which I understood the narrator wanted to secure the hero a kind of de-instrumentalizing authenticity over the accidental mission. Again, another TV show features a young man wooing a lady. On a date at Chung-Gae Creek Park, he says to her, in an attempt to win her love, “I am all rangman.” Then extending his body, he adds, trying to convince her of his romanticity, “There is rangman in my heart, in my belly, and my butt.” By this, I understand, the man tries to prove the trans-bodily autonomy of his love to his beloved. In such ways that each hero relies on rangman to secure more or less personal autonomy from surrounding realities, Korea has acquainted herself with the concept of rangman irrespective of, as in the above examples, regional, generational, and body-politic distinctions.

The thing to note together with this gradual fusion of Romanticism into Korean culture is an advent of a parodic tone in current usage of the term, rangman. While the second example above reflects the new phenomenon in a certain way, other examples can be best found in a lately remake of well-liked Korean classic movies like The Barefooted Young and The Stars Heavenly Home. These movies, which tell a story of star-crossed lovers of different social standings and of a historical and ontological uneasiness of industrialized Korea in 1970s through a suicide of a low-born but good-willed woman respectively, are works of well-defined romantic themes of rebellion and misfits in Korean terms. We see lately many parodic versions of these movies produced on TV. Mostly in the form of a comic remake which would make the difficult romantic themes feel more domesticated to Korean people, the characters in the new versions imitate the sentimental and tearful voice of the original ones and act living the same fates in a hyperbolical fashion, thus intimately creating a critical distance from the old versions.

This parodic tone may be regarded as being rather contemporaneous with Romanticism itself as we witness a strong self-consciousness in European
Romanticism which hinders “immediacy” in experience. However, in contrast to European reality, parody is an element that is actualized anew—that is, in a new level of visibility—in Korea and I argue that it indicates a change in Korean approach to Romanticism. In other words, the change in tonal approach to romantic sentiments tells that Korea has become self-conscious of the loose adoption of Romanticism and that the self-reflecting distance indicates that, if not in an active sense, the subject and object relationship in European Romanticism has certainly become inverted; Korea has begun to reflect herself on the adoption of foreign cultures with a sense of sovereignty. This argument might sound too obvious because one cannot say anything of oneself without positing oneself as a subject and for that reason it would rather make no sense to say that one entity was just passive in adopting a foreign entity. However, to emphasize, the history of Korean adoption of Romanticism dramatically displays the process in which one comes to re-establish the structure of autonomous subjectivity in relation to an alien object. In Alan Richardson's summary of Alison Hickey's argument on cultural interaction through Romanticism, Korea is a case where the agent “has subverted the colonial encounter of subsuming difference into identity,” I would add here, not in ideology, but in structure.

My next question then: Why is it Romanticism that enables such a subversion when it is strongly suspected of imperial ideology? I first propose Leo Bersani’s formalistic explanation based on the Freudian theory on the function of art as an answer to this question. According to Bersani, art “elegantly constrain[s] us to such recognitions [of historical violence] by

13) A. Richardson, op. cit., p. 11,
substituting the 'violence' of multiple, constantly shifting formal contacts for the violence of narrativized history."\textsuperscript{14)} Art categorically belongs to a discourse of formalism in the sense that by subverting violently progressing narrative sequences via a kind of critical self-consciousness of their form, it makes the “de-forming' or 'dis-formulating' effects of desire” heard.\textsuperscript{15)} As a genre of art, Romanticism shares this resistive element of formalism which remains consistent even across antithetic ideological entities.

However, the first response still does not answer the question of uniqueness of Romanticism in the sense that Romanticism as it was adopted into the early modern Korea represented rather all the kinds of Western artistic movements including Romanticism itself than the exclusively historicized Romanticism in the early 19th century Europe. According to Young-Bok Cho in \textit{The Ideology and Aesthetics of Korean Poems in the Early 1920's}, Korean literary men in the 1920's understood the various trends of art and literature ushered into Korea in that era, such as Symbolism, Decadence, Art for Art's Sake and Purism, “all comprehensively as Romanticism.”\textsuperscript{16)} What makes Romanticism a notion of this comprehensiveness that comprises every foreign entity? To answer this question, I will briefly turn to Paul de Man's criticism on Romanticism as he attends to romantic resistiveness to ideological stabilization and re-discuss it in the context of a Lacanian notion of the real with the ultimate goal of developing the romantic negativity in relation to ideology as a primal form of driving force to historical changes.


\textsuperscript{15)} \textit{ibid}. p. 111.

Explaining how allegory works differently from symbol (that “postulates the possibility of an identity or identification” of the subject and the object), de Man argues that allegory is how romantic language really performs its signifying function since, “renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide,” it relies for meaning on “the void of temporal difference of sign.”

According to him, the true voice of Romanticism can be found in the painful knowledge of the spuriousness of the self’s identification with the external object and the full recognition of the object as a non-self. This disjunctive moment of the subject and the object, which I would call “the moment of a missed encounter” (discovered by other critics too but dismissed as a non-property of Romanticism in need of sublimation), did de Man regard as what makes Romanticism what it is since the consciousness in predicament is the very thing that confers on the subject authenticity in relation to inauthentic language. So here comes a defensive strategy like the language in the poetry of William Wordsworth, one of the most canonical romantic poets. In de Man's accounts, Wordsworth does not regard nature to be at the disposal of his interpretive will. The poet rather finds in nature a self-image that will prevent him, on the one hand, from completely turning into a destructive non-self, but, on the other, will subsist his egoism without losing the sense of spuriousness of the very experience. The poet's language “illuminates this mid-point from which it glimpses its inauthentic past in the light of the precarious knowledge of its future.”

Thus poetry is no more a history; it has become “a phenomenology of mind” (87).

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We can learn from de Man's criticism that the source of poetic power lies in the negative moment of disjunction when the self recognizes the otherness of external objects by being halted from metaphoric appropriation of them and that the romantic language (as exemplified by Wordsworth) renders the negative moment even more palpable and communicable by stating the precariousness still “figuratively” as it leaves traumatic traces on the mind. Wordsworth says his mind “rises,” “sinks,” “hangs,” and “lies” instead of saying, for example, “I stopped to think about this or that.” Instead of sinking into the manneristic formalism which lacks in attractively progressing narratives, or reducing meaning to a dogmatic schema, his language recovers poetic experience “in the totality of the phenomenal world of sky and earth.”

Hence it lets the reader to observe the world in what Albert O. Wlecke calls “an Adamite empiricism.” If any meaning is produced in the process, it is the reader, not the poet, who interprets poetic words in that meaningful fashion. Wordsworth uses such words as “something,” “it,” and “the utmost” to refer to a source of poetic meaningfulness, not specifying what that “something” is, for instance. Defined to be “fiduciary symbols” by Donald Davies, those words “have meaning so long as we trust them.” Accordingly, for one thing, it may be concluded that if Romanticism has such comprehensive appeal as an artistic experience, it is because it recovers the poetic experience of self-shattering in a most comprehensive language. Probably the word “rangman” testifies to this characteristic of romantic comprehensiveness by coming to signify just “it.”

20) *ibid.* p. 87,
Furthermore, the moment of disjunction, which de Man understands as self-serving (not history-serving, to say) after all, needs to be understood in a more productive sense. Most recently, Paul Hamilton in *Metaromanticism: Aesthetics, Literature, Theory* sought to combat de Man's “pure immanence” theory with a new view on romantic self-consciousness. Refuting what he calls “de Man's deconstructive need to believe that the aesthetic [. . .] habitually mystifies and can never instantiate a reality absolutely indifferent to our contradictory modes of being in it,”23) he argues that “[i]rony,” a kind of literary self-consciousness on the non-coincidence of words and reality in texts, “is not a history of inauthentic foreclosures of an infinite linear progress, but a branching out into lateral connections, a sideways rolling expansion socializing the infinity present at each moment.”24) The core of his criticism is not only to accept Romanticism’s susceptibility to “romantic ideology,” the bad habit of self-reflection, but to recognize Romanticism’s discontent with its own habit and its struggle against it at the same time. In *Sincerity’s Shadow: Self-Consciousness in British Romantic and Mid-Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, Deborah Forbes also traces romantic poets’ skepticism “about the authority of any individual claim to self-understanding” and defines its proper function to be a momentum to facilitate “the experience of the unknown at the core of proposed self-knowledge.”25) As Colin Jager writes in review of Hamilton’s book, there abides in current Romanticism study an interest ”in the political possibilities that adhere to a history of lost chances, foreclosed opportunities, and near misses—those moments, in other words, when romantic

24) ibid. p. 20.
texts seem to gesture toward alternative kinds of social organization that never quite come into focus.” 26) I will below discuss this negative potential of Romanticism as a foreground for “multicultural politics” 27) and its implication for the cross-national interaction of Romanticism and Korea by reading it through the Lacanian notion of “the real.”

In a Lacanian framework of understanding the human condition, it is essential to understand the real in an interdependent relation to the imaginary and the symbolic. While the imaginary is the dimension of duality where one comes to recognize external objects as self-reflecting images in an extension of one's interiority, the symbolic is a tripartite dimension where one comes to organize the imaginary world in a unifying way via an intervention of an other-worldly system of the Law, mostly language. It is only the symbolic dimension of meaningfulness where one can be born as a human being. Then, when Jacques Lacan defines the real, the dimension of an ontological absolute, as “the impossible,” 28) the impossibility is not the impossibility of the symbolic to fully actualize the real: if it being so, the real would entail an alienated shuttle movement of consciousness around an untouchable absolute. Rather, it is the impossibility of the symbolic to fully actualize the symbolic itself: we have access to our existential absolute only through the symbolic and the limit in our existence derives from the fact that the symbolic, a dimension of structure where elements have no positive existence but are constituted by virtue of their mutual differences, can never complete itself, The real, far from being an implicit norm that the symbolic can never reach, is “a resistant kernel

within the Symbolic process itself.” Thus, as there is no transcendental dimension exempt from the mundane reality of the symbolic, the encounter with the real which one experiences as the “not-all” of contingent historical reality is the precondition of the creation of a new reality. The romantic momentum of a missed encounter, which is factually another Lacanian name for the real, needs to be understood in these terms as an initiative step for a pass into history whose multifarious proliferation depends on a resistance to fake self-plenitude of meaningfulness.

The passage on “Imagination [. . .] that power” in Book VI of *The Prelude* by Wordsworth can serve as a quick example for the creatively driving force of the encounter with the real. The passage is a part of the description of the path taken by the poet during a trip over the Simplon Pass in the Alps. The poet was heading toward the summit of the mountain, the prime symbol of grandeur, but only realized later that he “had [already] crossed the Alps.” The poet tries to define in the passage this anti-climatic experience of having unknowingly crossed the summit of the Alps:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imagination!—lifting up itself</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before the eye and progress of my song</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like an unfathered vapour, here that power,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In all the might of its endowments, came</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halted without a struggle to break through,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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And now, recovering, to my soul I say
'I recognize thy glory'.

(6. 525–532)

One prevailing reading of this passage is Alan Liu's. According to him, this passage illustrates a typical romantic gesture of displacing materialistic reality with human interiority after the mind fails to encounter the world in the right place at the right time. He writes, “The aim of Book 6 is to prevent the self from looking through nature to underlying history. Nature must instead reflect the self.”32) According to him, in aggrandizement of self-reflecting interiority, the poet efforts “to purge tyranny by containing tyranny within itself” as “the empire of Imagination.”33)

This view of romantic internalization, shared by critics associated with New Historicism, however, does not take into account the fact that the poet does take into account the fact that he only later knew that he had already crossed the Alps when he mentions the recovery of imagination. Whereas Liu understands that this passage on the recovery of imagination implicates that the poet sublimated the experience of failure toward transcendental unity, I understand that the inclusion of the statement on failure testifies that the failure has become an internal part of the recovered imagination. The poet cannot leave out the experience of the failure in the Alps because it is too traumatic to be sublimated in the narrative sequence of recovery.

Thus, the poet's recovery of imagination is accompanied by the recognition that it is “unfathered,” that is, devoid of the Name-of-the-Father. The Alps tells him that imagination is an illegitimate power of creation. The illegitimacy,

33) ibid. p. 24.
however, far from being disheartening, is the source of the glory of imagination because, as such, it is the only power that can bring the human world into being: it is a “militant” force that can usurp and fertilize the world at a stroke (6. 531-548). Rather than displacing the materialistic world into the poet's interiority or being stagnated in the prison-house of language, the poet comes to understand the world in the form of fatherless instability or dynamism through the experience of a missed-encounter. It seems of deep import that the imagination passage posits at the end of Book 6, that is, in the middle of the 13 Book-length narrative of The Prelude as if a rite of passage to adulthood before his commitments to historical realities of industrialism and revolution in London and France each in subsequent Books. Rather than halting him for reflection on the missed workings of the mind, the absence of the father gains momentum to drive the poet, a man of creative imagination who can thus recreate the world from the level of zero, to scenes of real history. Paradoxically, this logic seems to mean that only in so far as we meet with Romanticism in the mode of a missed-encounter, are we meeting it at a right place.

I think that Romanticism as a foreign entity has played this role of an alien object that one encounters in the mode of a self-shattering disruption in the consciousness of Korean people. The mixture of negativity and adaptability witnessed over the Korean adoption of Romanticism may be suggested as a core ground for this interpretation. Romanticism, as an artistic form of foreign origin, contains a property that inherently resists interpretative appropriation. Apart from the matter of correctness in understanding texts and even the loss in linguistic materiality accruing to translation, the fact of foreign textuality,

34) For a discussion on this topic, see Paul de Man, “‘Conclusions': Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of a Translator,’” The Resistance to Theory, Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1986. pp. 73-105.
when understood in terms of non-correspondence between languages, can be a source of resistance to semantic self-plenitude. Again, nothing could be more traumatic to the authenticity of the father than the experience of colonization. The mood of melancholy and emptiness in early Korean romantic poems usually attributable to the colonial realities may be also associated with the experience of the absent father in that era. Decadence, though lacking in political power to induce concrete changes, was a rare sentiment of non-conformity that attained relatively wide audienceship for the first time in the romantic period of modern Korea.

Modernization of Korea has double faces too. It was another traumatic experience to Korean people in requiring parting with old comforting traditions. However, the negativity in that self-alienating process was coupled with the other aspect of a separation from the old familiar and fixed ones. This alienating property has corresponded to the anxious desire of Korean people for something other than the given. Of course, other Korean artistic and cultural practices were and still are working as possible answers for the desire. And yet, the property of Romanticism and the historical contingency that it came to Korea in such exotic ways maximized the chance of Koreans experiencing Romanticism as an answer to that transcendent desire. So, when it is said that Korea has miss-encountered Romanticism, maybe we Koreans are experiencing Romanticism more authentically than we are aware, in so far as we are actualizing the negativity into a self-shattering momentum of creation.

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낭만주의와 한국: 어긋난 만남?

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18세 후반에서 19세기 전반기에 걸쳐 부흥하였으며 서양의 근대사상사에 가장 많은 영향력을 미친 것으로 평가받는 낭만주의는 1920년경 식민지배국이었던 일본을 경유하여 주로 당시 일본에 유학중이던 엘리트 지식인들을 통해 한국에 유입되었다. 낭만주의는 당시 동시다발적으로 유입된 다양한 서구의 문예사조를 통틀어 일컫는 용어, 즉 유럽적이거나 서구적이라는 지역성을 넘어, 외부에서 유입된 모든 이질적인 요소를 아우르는 ‘외래성/타자성’의 개념으로 이해될 수 있다. 근대역사에 두드러진 외장성과의 조우로 여겨지는 낭만주의와 한국의 만남은, 그러나, 대체로 바람직한 문화적 도킹으로 이해되지 않았다. 식민지배국에 의해 강요된 문호개방, 엘리트 중심주의, 그리고 이중 변역된 텍스트 등 낭만주의는 한국적인 토착화를 어렵게 하는 여러 물질적 조건에 기반하고 있었다. 그래서 한국에서 낭만주의는 원 텍스트의 정확한 읽기에 관한 다소간 소모적인 논쟁이나 한국 낭만주의가 낭만주의의 본질을 제대로 수용하지 못한 변종 혹은 기형의 일종이라는 시각을 중심으로 주로 논의되어 왔다. 본고는 당대의 문학 작품 및 이후 한국의 문화 현상을 추적해 이러한 ‘어긋남’이야 말로 외래성의 본질이며, 낭만주의는 토착화가 아니라 낯설 자체에서 한국사회에 계속 영향을 미치고 있음을 보여준다.

주제어: 낭만주의(Romanticism), 한국(Korea), 어긋남(missed encounter/ disjunction), 실재(the real), 외래성/타자성(foreignness/otherness)

(논문투고일: 2012.05.04. / 심사일: 2012.05.14. / 심사완료일: 2012.05.26.)