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TWO ASPECTS OF THE "INDIVIDUAL" IN KOREAN LYRIC POETRY: FOCUSING ON THE POEMS OF KIM SOWOL AND YOO CHIHWAN

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Abstract: This paper examines how the notion of the individual is poetically realized in modern Korean lyric poetry through a comparative reading of Kim Sowol and Yoo Chihwan. In Korea, modernity unfolded not as gradual cultural change but as a rupture shaped by colonization and liberation, making questions of subjectivity and identity especially acute in literature. Lyric poetry became a sensitive medium for registering shifts in interiority, affect, and world perception. Sowol's poems construct a speaker who embraces separation from the world while actively reappropriating traditional sentiment; by organizing seemingly passive emotions into deliberate poetic structures, his work performs a politics of emotion, intervening in the world through inwardness. By contrast, Yoo confronts the absence of transcendence and treats nihilism as the starting point for ethical self-constitution; the self emerges as a resolute, responsible agent that shapes life without external guarantees. Reading these opposing yet complementary strategies together reveals a dynamic of convergence and divergence: while one turns inward to reclaim

affective depth, the other expands outward through existential engagement. This dialectic shows how early modern Korean lyricism articulated and transformed the figure of the individual, offering a broader perspective on the evolving configurations of selfhood at the threshold of modernity.

Keywords: Individual, Kim Sowol, Yoo Chihwan, Korean Lyric Poetry, Interiority, Modernity.

한국 서정시에 나타난 '개인'의 두 양태: 김소월과 유치환을 중심으로

초록 본 논문은 한국 서정시의 형성 과정에서 '개인'이라는 존재가 어떻게 시적으로 형상화되었는지를 김소월과 유치환의 작품을 중심으로 비교 고찰한 것이다. 한국 근대는 단순한 문명사적 변화가 아니라, 식민지 지배와 해방이라는 격변의 역사적 조건 속에서 개인의 주체성과 정체성 문제가 문학의 핵심 화두로 부상한 시기였다. 특히 서정시는 이러한 변화의 흐름 속에서 개인의 내면성과 정동, 세계 인식의 전환을 예민하게 포착하는 장르로 기능하였다. 김소월과 유치환은 각기 상이한 시적 태도와 세계 인식을 바탕으로 '개인'이라는 문제에 접근하였으며, 이들의 시는 근대적 자아 형성의 상반된 양상을 선명히 보여준다. 김소월의 시는 세계와의 단절을 감수하면서도 전통 정서를 능동적으로 전유하고 정서적 표현을 통해 타자에게 미묘한 파장을 유도하는 전략적인 주체를 형상화한다. 그는 수동적으로 보일 수 있는 감정을 시적 구성 속에서 정교하게 조직함으로써, 내면을 통해 세계에 개입하는 '감정의 정치학'을 실현한다. 반면 유치환은 신의 부재와 초월의 상실이라는 실존적 조건을 직시하며, 허무의 인식을 통해 인간 주체가 자기 삶의 방향을 스스로 결정해야 함을 강조한다. 그의 시에서 개인은 공동체나 초월적 질서가 아닌 자신의 의지와 책임에 따라 삶을 구성해 나가는 존재로 나타난다. 이처럼 김소월과 유치환은 각기 '개인'을 '수렴'과 '발산'의 방식으로 형상화하며, 한국 서정시가 근대의 문턱에서 개인이라는 존재를 어떻게 의미화하고 변형해 왔는지를 입체적으로 보여준다. 본 논문은 이 두 시인의 비교를 통해 한국 근대 서정시의 역사적 전환 속에서 주체 형성과 존재 인식의 스펙트럼이 어떻게 확장되어 갔는지를 새롭게 조망하고자 한다.

핵심어: 개 인, 김소월, 유치환, 한국 서정시, 내면, 근대성

1. Introduction

Since the 18th and 19th centuries, when German Romanticists foregrounded subjectivity as the essence of lyricism, the concept of the self has been regarded as a central axis in the construction of modernity. This perspective is well illustrated in the observation that "the moment lyricism is understood as the expression of subjectivity, it necessarily encompasses a decisive view on the relationship between poetry and the world, or the poetic attitude towards it." (Jeong Myeong-Kyo, 정명교 2006: 54) Once established through lyricism, the poetic subject is no longer a being naturally embedded in the world, but rather a consciousness that stands apart and gazes upon it. In this context, both distancing from the world and self-awareness are equally necessary conditions, making the existence of the Other a prerequisite for the emergence of the "I." In other words, the Other becomes the sole conduit through which the self can come to recognize itself. By departing from a sense of unity with the world and encountering a foreign Other, the tensions and conflicts that arise serve only to sharpen the contours of the self. Ultimately, any genuine relationship that poetry seeks to establish with the Other must first presuppose the construction of an autonomous and differentiated "I" as the subject of that relationship.

In Korea, this process of establishing a modern subject unfolded within the externally imposed constraints of colonization and liberation, rendering the issue of identity and the relationship between the self and the world all the more acute and urgent. As communal foundations disintegrated and individuals came to be defined by the gaze of the Other, a desire emerged to affirm the self through an inner voice. The lyric poem, in this context, functioned as a linguistic laboratory uniquely sensitive to such internal agitation and signs of resistance. The poems of Kim Sowol and Yoo Chihwan stand at opposite poles of Korean lyricism, each offering a distinct formal approach to the representation of the individual in their time. A comparative analysis of their work, therefore, offers a crucial path for understanding the diverse configurations of the individual and the broader landscape of Korean lyric poetry.

Previous studies on the modern subjectivity found in the works of Kim Sowol and Yoo Chihwan have largely focused on each poet's individual characteristics and historical positioning. Representative works on Kim Sowol include (Jeong Myeong-Kyo, 정명교 2006; Lee

Hye-won, 이혜원 2006; Kwon Hui-cheol, 권희철 2009; Nam Ki-hyeok, 남기혁 2010; Jeon Young-joo, 전영주 2011; Lee Kwang-ho, 이광호 2013; Shim Jae-hui, 심재휘 2017), while studies on Yoo Chihwan include (Kim Yun-sik, 김윤식 1984; Kim Hyun, 김현 1992; Kim Yong-jik, 김용직 1996; Kim Jong-gil, 김종길 1999; Moon Dok-su, 문덕수 2003; Sohng ki-han, 송기한 2009; Kim Yun-jeong, 김윤정 2015). These prior studies suggest that the individual in Kim Sowol's poetry seeks to establish subjectivity and interiority through a rupture from the traditional world, whereas in Yoo Chihwan's work, the individual is portrayed as one who must confront the void and reconstruct the grounds of life in a world where transcendence has already collapsed. If Sowol constructs the self by demarcating boundaries with the Other, Yoo Chihwan attempts to build the self ex nihilo within a decentered world.

Yet despite the depth and rigor of these individual studies, there has been a lack of comparative research examining both poets as axes along a shared continuum – research that interrogates the diverse modalities of the individual and their lyrical expressions in the formation of modern Korean lyric poetry. Although both poets articulate the lyric subject in highly distinctive ways amid historical upheaval, their starkly contrasting poetic worlds have perhaps made such comparative approaches rare. However, the very fact that they adopt opposing postures in confronting the Other and shaping interiority makes it essential to explore the relational dynamics between their respective poetics. Doing so is key to a comprehensive understanding of how the individual was figured in the Korean poetry of their time.

Accordingly, this study defines and compares the poetic worlds of Kim Sowol and Yoo Chihwan in terms of the interiorization of rupture (convergence) and the transcendence of rupture (divergence), respectively. Through this comparison, it aims to analyze the development and ontological deepening of the concept of the individual in modern Korean lyric poetry. The two modalities of the individual revealed in their poetry demonstrate that the formation of subjectivity in the modern era was by no means unidirectional.

2. The Interiorization of Rupture: Kim Sowol's Convergent "Individual"

> "For reasons unknown to me, Sowol disliked being called a folk song poet. He wished simply to be addressed as a poet, if anything."[1] (Kim Eok, 김억 1935)

Recalling the testimony that Kim Sowol was displeased with the label "folk song poet," one can surmise that he was already gazing beyond the inherited world and tradition toward a new poetic horizon. Indeed, while his poetry drew heavily from traditional sentiments, it simultaneously restructured them as a foundation for the emergence of a modern self. This dual operation – of continuity and transformation – ultimately positioned his work as a critical point of departure in the history of modern Korean poetry.

On the mountain, flowers bloom,

They bloom,

Regardless of whether spring or summer has come,

They bloom.

On the mountain,

On the mountain,

The flowers that bloom

Stand alone in the distance.

Oh, little bird crying in the mountain,

Loving the flower,

[1] "소월 자신은 어떤 이유인지 모르거니와 민요시인으로 자기를 부르는 것을 그는 싫어하여 시인이면 시인이라 불러주기를 바라던 것이외다." (Kim Eok 김억 1935)

Living there,

In the mountain.

On the mountain, flowers wither,

They wither,

Regardless of whether spring or summer has gone,

They wither.[2]

(Kim Sowol, 김소월2007: 308)

As suggested by the poetic setting, *Mountain Flowers (산유화)* portrays a flower blooming alone in the distance, bearing solitude in isolation. Even as time flows – whether spring or summer – it blossoms and withers without clear purpose or reason, wholly apart from the world it once belonged to. Its only companion is a little bird crying in the mountain, an ephemeral Other that lingers briefly beside it.

Here, the flower becomes a self-conscious subject: by blooming alone in the distance, it not only affirms its detachment from the surrounding world but also constructs an interior space of its own. Within this secluded domain, the presence of the bird – a figure capable of witnessing and understanding the flower's solitude – serves as a mediator. The bird bears testimony to the flower's existence, allowing its selfhood to endure even after its disappearance.

What is equally significant in this poem is the veiled presence of the lyrical subject, the "I." The narrator remains hidden, observing the flower from afar. The repetition of the word "in the distance" implies a gap not only between the flower and the world, but also between the flower and the speaker. While the flower shares its solitude with the bird, the "I" is left in absolute isolation, bereft even of that minimal relationality. As a result, a double rupture unfolds: first, the flower is separated from the world; then, the speaker is separated from the flower.

[2] "산에는 꽃 피네/ 꽃이 피네/ 갈 봄 여름 없이/ 꽃이 피네// 산에/ 산에/ 피는 꽃은/ 저만치 혼자서 피어 있네// 산에서 우는 작은 새요/ 꽃이 좋아/ 산에서/ 사노라네// 산에는 꽃 지네/ 꽃이 지네/ 갈 봄 여름 없이/ 꽃이 지네" (김소월 2007: 308)

Thus, the sorrow the flower experienced in severing ties with the world is compounded by the speaker's own sorrow in being distanced from the flower itself. The speaker inhabits a space of double bind – neither belonging to the world nor to the flower's realm. Yet through this multi-layered detachment, the lyrical "I" gradually becomes aware of itself as a distinct subject, formed in the very act of observing the Other from afar.

O shattered name!

O name parted in the air!

O name with no one left to answer!

The name I shall die calling!

The last word left deep in my heart

Could never be fully spoken.

O you, my beloved one!

O you, my beloved one!

The red sun has hung on the western ridge.

Even the deer cry out in sorrow.

From the hill, set apart and alone,

I call your name.

I call out, again and again, overcome with sorrow.

I call out, again and again, overcome with sorrow.

Though my voice slips past unheard,

The space between heaven and earth is far too wide.

Even if I turn to stone standing here,

Name I will call until I die!

O you, my beloved one!

O you, my beloved one![3]

(Kim Sowol, 김소월2007: 257)

In *Invocation of the Spirit (초혼)*, the lyrical "I" grieves over the death of a beloved and expresses intense emotional anguish. This extreme atmosphere clearly embodies the speaker's sense of rupture and disconnection. As seen in the opening lines – "O shattered name!", "O name parted in the air!", "O name with no one left to answer!" – this poetic invocation dramatizes the divide between the living and the dead, and the speaker's sorrow escalates to its peak in the final line of the first stanza: "The name I shall die calling!" The speaker expresses a willingness to die for this calling, thereby amplifying the pain of severance.

In the second stanza, the reason for this emotional outburst becomes clear: the speaker laments that they could not utter even one last word to the person they loved – "The last word left deep in my heart / Could never be fully spoken." Compared to the slow intensification of feeling in the first stanza, the second stanza directly reveals the cause of this sorrow, raising the emotional temperature to a new high.

Kim Sowol's transformation of the 7–5 syllabic pattern typically features a longer line (7 syllables) that serves as a leap in meaning, followed by a shorter line (5 syllables) that provides closure, forming a small semantic unit. (Kim Jong-hoon, 김종훈 2011: 393) In

[3] "산산이 부서진 이름이여!/ 허공중에 헤어진 이름이여!/ 불러도 주인 없는 이름이여!/ 부르다가 내가 죽을 이름이여!// 심중에 남아 있는 말 한마디는/ 끝끝내 마저 하지 못하였구나./ 사랑하던 그 사람이여!/ 사랑하던 그 사람이여!// 붉은 해는 서산 마루에 걸리었다./ 사슴이의 무리도 슬피 운다./ 떨어져 나와 앉은 산 위에서/ 나는 그대의 이름을 부르노라.// 설움에 겹도록 부르노라./ 설움에 겹도록 부르노라./ 부르는 소리는 비껴가지만/ 하늘과 땅 사이가 너무 넓구나.// 선 채로 이 자리에 돌이 되어도/ 부르다가 내가 죽을 이름이여!/ 사랑하던 그 사람이여!/ 사랑하던 그 사람이여!" (김소월 2007: 257)

Invocation of the Spirit, we see this clearly in the first stanza: "O shattered / name!", "O name parted in the air / name!", "O name with no one left / to answer!", "The name I shall die / calling!" Each seven-syllable portion precedes and modifies the five-syllable portion, forming a complete unit of meaning. The longer segment sets the premise, while the shorter delivers its emotional consequence.

However, in the second stanza, the cadence is disrupted by the repeated cry, "O you, my beloved one!" – a pair of consecutive short utterances that arrest the verse's rhythm. The overlapping rhythm of long and short lines is here inverted into a short-to-long sequence, halting the forward flow of the verse. (Kim Jong-hoon, 김종훈 2011: 394) This rupture intensifies the sense of absence and renders the speaker's grief all the more poignant. The second stanza transforms the established rhythmic flow to unleash the emotional climax.

This means that he "sought to compose poems as faithfully as possible to his own breathing and voice in order to break free from the traditional 7–5 metric form," and that "Kim So-wol repeatedly experimented with arranging his verses in accordance with his own intended rhythm." (Ku In Mo, 구인모 2002: 174)

In *Invocation of the Spirit*, both thematically and rhythmically, the speaker asserts the self through the experience of rupture. The cry "The name I shall die calling!" does not portray the speaker as a mere extension of the beloved, but rather as a separate, equal being. If the speaker were fully identified with the beloved, they would have collapsed at the moment of witnessing death. That the speaker is calling out the name – and enduring – signifies a lyric subject who, emerging from disharmony with the world, forms a self and participates in reality on their own terms.

In the third stanza, the spatial background – "From the hill, set apart and alone" – is explicitly introduced. The speaker, "torn away," is situated in a space separate from the beloved. From this interior space, the imagery of the red sun and a herd of deer mirrors the speaker's emotional state; they too cry out the beloved's name. Though the call resounds with deep sorrow, the distance between heaven and earth is too vast, and the cry only glances away. The speaker's tireless effort, paradoxically, reinforces the very disconnection they seek to overcome.

This impossibility ignites emotion once more. In the fifth stanza, the speaker's resolve transcends death itself. The line Even if I turn into stone here, standing still evokes the Korean folktale of the Mangbuseok (망부석), the Stone of Waiting Wife – a woman who waits so long for her husband that she becomes a rock. This line echoes

and expands the first stanza's "The name I shall die calling!", transforming it into a vow to continue calling even beyond death, reaching into the timelessness where the beloved resides.

Whereas in the first stanza the speaker's relationship to the beloved is rooted in longing, by the fifth stanza this relationship becomes oppositional – defined by the speaker's determination to wait, even if it takes hundreds or thousands of years. The speaker's self is suspended in tension between life and death, rejecting a future without the beloved and choosing instead to inhabit the eternal present of calling their name.

When you leave me,

because you find me loathsome,

I shall let you go in silence, with grace.

From Yak Mountain in Yeongbyeon,

I will gather armfuls of azaleas

and strew them on the path you take.

With every step you walk away,

tread softly upon those flowers –

gently, and without regret.

When you leave me,

because you find me loathsome,

even in death, I shall not shed a single tear.[4]

(Kim Sowol, 김소월 2007: 290-291)

The Azaleas (진달래꽃) is often interpreted as a poem that conveys the emotions of a woman abandoned by her beloved. What is most emphasized in this reading is the speaker's declaration that she will not shed a single tear, even in death. Even as she is abandoned, the speaker remains gentle and accepting, scattering flowers along the path her beloved takes. Her forbearance reaches its peak in the final line, where she insists she will not cry, not even in death. This has led to the dominant interpretation that her pain is so deep because she has not fully given up her longing or resentment toward her beloved. Such a reading ultimately reduces the relationship between the speaker and the beloved to a one-sided and subordinate dynamic.

However, rather than focusing on the speaker's attitude, what deserves closer attention is her action. "The speaker's attitude is not presented as an established fact, but as a performative revelation" (Jeong Kwari, 정과리 2012a: 39). That is, the many gestures described in the poem – gathering azalea flowers from Mount Yak (약산) in Yeongbyeon (영변), scattering them along the path the beloved will take, and the act of asking him to gently tread upon them – are all hypothetical, yet to occur. These are not descriptions of things that have already happened; rather, they indicate intentions or possibilities for future events. When the speaker says she will scatter the flowers along his path, what she truly intends remains unspoken. She is, in fact, making a wager, concealing her true motives.

"All of this is the speaker's strategy to provoke a response from the lover" (Jeong Kwari, 정과리 2012a: 40). From this moment of tension, the beloved is placed at a crossroads of choice. After hearing the speaker's cold threat that she will not shed a tear, even in death, it will be difficult for him to simply tread upon the azaleas – symbols of their shared memories – without hesitation.

We can quickly identify who the speaker of The Azaleas (진달래꽃) is: one who not only accepts separation as their present condition but also

[4] "나 보기가 역겨워/ 가실 때에는/ 말없이 고히 보내드리우리다// 영변에 약산 진달래꽃/ 아름 따다 가실 길에 뿌리우리다// 가시는 걸음걸음/ 놓인 그 꽃을/ 사뿐히 즈려 밟고 가시옵소서// 나 보기가 역겨워/ 가실 때에는/ 죽어도 아니 눈물 흘리우리다" (김소월 2007: 290-291)

> intervenes in that separation through their own deliberate action. In other words, the speaker is someone who possesses both individuality and agency – the defining traits of a truly modern subject. As an individual, the "I" confirms their separation from others, including the community to which they once belonged. As an agent, however, this "I" actively seeks to overcome that separation by investing mental and emotional labor in the creation of a shared world, a society in which coexistence becomes possible. Yet a truly modern subject, one who fully understands the duality of individuality and action, also knows that such action cannot immediately overcome separation. It will necessarily be a long and arduous struggle. One must scheme with the mind and appeal with the heart; one must deceive and plead in turn. This is precisely why the speaker of "Azaleas" sets up a theatrical space before the departing lover, staging a psychological game through the imagined mise-en-scène. (…) By reintroducing this familiar, traditional setting, the speaker first satisfies the reader's emotional expectations through a surface-level empathy. But then, paradoxically, the speaker begins to discard those conventional responses, opening up a space for new emotional reactions to emerge.5 (Jeong Kwari, 정과리 2012b: 41-42)

As a result, the speaker of *The Azaleas* accepts the separation from the lover as their own situation and responds by asserting the modern individual – *I* – at the forefront. By inserting this modern subject into the traditional situation of parting with a lover, the poem generates a distinct individuality. The speaker is no longer simply the

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5 "「진달래꽃」의 화자가 누구인가를 금세 확인할 수 있을 것이다. 바로 단절을 자신의 상황으로 받아들이는 사람이자 동시에 그 단절을 극복하기 위해 자신의 행동을 개입시키는 사람인 것이다. 다시 말해, '나'의 단독성과 나의 '행위성'을 갖춘 이가 그이다. 바로 그 존재가 진정한 의미에서의 '근대인'이다. 단독자로서의 '나'는 주변의 다른 존재들, 자신이 속한 공동체로부터 자신이 떨어져 있음을 확인한다. 반면 '행위자'로서의 '나'는 그 단절을 극복해 함께 어울려 사는 '사회'를 만들기 위해 자신의 정신과 노동을 투여한다. 그런데 '단독성'과 '행위'의 양면성을 정확히 인식하고 있는 근대인이라면, 그의 행위가 단숨에 단절을 이길 수 없다는 것을 잘 알고 있다. 그것은 매우 지난한 싸움이 될 수밖에 없다. 머리를 짜고 가슴을 열어야 한다. 속이고 호소해야 한다. 「진달래꽃」의 화자가 떠나는 임 앞에 가상의 무대를 설치할 것을 예고하고, 그것에 의지해, 연인과 심리전을 벌이는 것은 그 때문이다. (…) 그는 이 전통적인 상황을 재도입함으로써, 독자와의 정서적 친화성을 충족한 후에, 그 다음엔 거꾸로 전통적인 반응을 폐기하고 새로운 반응을 창출하는 작업을 해나갔다." (정과리 2012b: 41-42)

emotional object of loss, but rises as a lyrical agent who constructs and regulates the situation. In this way, the poem breaks free from the conventional mold of farewell songs and illustrates how the modern individual actively positions themselves between internal affect and the external world. Put differently, *The Azaleas* can be seen as a representative lyrical text that enacts the formation of a modern subject through the dual axes of "individuality" and "agency."

What is particularly noteworthy is that this strategic articulation does not aim to overturn or disrupt the order of the external world, but instead demonstrates a politics of emotion that seeks to achieve its aims by delicately working within that order's existing affective structure. The speaker does not prove their existence through overt confrontation or opposition, but rather creates subtle emotional reverberations that elicit a response from the other, thereby asserting their presence. This suggests that Kim Sowol's lyrical self, while appearing weak or submissive on the surface, is in fact a far more refined and active subject. The controlled and repressed emotions themselves become expressions of will, and it is through this mode of restraint that the speaker's desire to intervene in the world and in relation to the other emerges. Thus, *The Azaleas* is not merely a song of resignation or sacrifice, but rather a complex exercise in self-positioning – one in which the modern subject negotiates and affirms their own place in relation to the other.

O bird,

floating in the sky –

your body is covered in feathers and collar.

In the fields, there's barley;

in the paddies, rice.

Heavily ripened, all now bowed low.

Past Mount Chosan (초산 楚山),

across Jeokyuryeong (적유령 狄踰嶺) Pass –

But why do you, pack-laden donkey,

trudge over those mountains?[6]

(Kim Sowol, 김소월2007: 509)

In *Clothes, Food, and Freedom (옷과 밥과 자유)*, the lives of the bird and the donkey are sharply contrasted. The bird's existence – marked by clothing (feathers and collar), food (barley in the fields and rice in the paddies), and above all, freedom (floating in the sky) – is portrayed positively. In contrast, the donkey's life, reduced to that of a mere beast of burden, is presented in a negative light.

Despite the donkey's labor in cultivating the fields and paddies, it is the free bird who ultimately enjoys the harvest. Yet the donkey quietly trudges on, crossing mountains and passes while carrying its load. At this point, the speaker intervenes directly, asking the donkey why it continues to climb the pass under such unjust conditions.

It is striking that the poem's title is *"Clothes, Food, and Freedom"*, yet the speaker's attention is directed not at the bird who possesses these things, but rather at the donkey who lacks them. This suggests that the speaker identifies more with the donkey and the earth than with the bird and the sky. Like the donkey, the speaker too lives a reality devoid of feathers, collar, or freedom.

Thus, by recognizing the rupture from the ideal space of the sky and turning toward the ground – toward reality – the speaker seeks to participate in that reality as an "I." The question, "But why do you, pack-laden donkey, trudge over those mountains?", signals a desire to confront the contradictions of the present. This attitude of facing reality head-on aligns with the stance of the modern individual.

3. Constructing Being from Nothingness: Yoo Chihwan's Divergent "Individual"

The poetic world of Yoo Chihwan secures a distinctive place in the

[6] "공중에 떠다니는/ 저기 저 새여/ 네 몸에는 털 있고 짓이 있지./ 밭에는 밭곡식 논에 물벼./ 눌하게 익어서 수그러졌네./ 초산(楚山) 지나 적유령(狄踰嶺)/ 넘어선다./ 짐 실은 저 나귀는 너 왜 넘니?" (김소월 2007: 509)

history of modern Korean poetry through an uncompromising trajectory of self-inquiry. He persistently delves into the fundamental conditions of human existence – namely, the tragic rift between finite life and a yearning for the infinite. Without turning away from the existential dilemmas of the individual amid the turbulent tides of history, Yoo expands them to a cosmic scale. His poetic thinking advances toward a deeper dimension, one in which nihilism is understood as the very essence of the world. Yoo's poetry confronts a reality in which God, as a transcendent order, can no longer serve as a central axis of human life. Consequently, the world is recognized as a space devoid of salvation – an absolute void.

Here, the void does not merely signify emptiness; rather, it becomes the very condition that compels the individual to rediscover their existence and actively seek new directions for life. Yoo Chihwan affirms the solitude and freedom of the human individual, not by relying on communal norms or transcendent beings, but by embracing the rupture from them. The consciousness of nothingness that pervades his work reveals the modern individual, cast into a godless world, who becomes aware of their responsibility for existence and strives to construct a meaningful life through will and reflection. In this sense, Yoo's poetic world may be understood not merely as a space of lamentation or despair in the face of oppressive realities, but rather as a testimonial terrain tracing the formation of the modern subject.

Accordingly, Yoo's poetry confronts the paradoxical and essential questions of life head-on, through a tone marked by "indignation, lamentation, resistance, and rebuke." (Kim Hyun, 김현 1992: 78) The dialectical tensions that dominate his work – nothingness/will, finitude (human)/infinity (divine), emotion/unemotion – do not remain mere oppositions. Instead, they are organically interwoven under the overarching theme of *life*. These tensions reflect Yoo's lifelong preoccupation with the duality of life and death, and the belief that finite human beings must always engage in thought within a horizon that encompasses both. Thus, his poetry prioritizes a mode of expression that exposes the unvarnished truths of life over refined techniques, and reveals a poetic ethos grounded in sincerity and existential engagement.

> The simple and recent vow to become a human being before becoming a poet weighs more heavily on me with each passing day, as I come to

> a deeper and deeper realization of how difficult it is to uphold.[7] (Yoo Chihwan, 유치환 1939: 5-6)

> This is because literature can never be born without being rooted in a deep sense of ethics. Writing that lacks ethics, literature that is not born from an ethical spirit, will first and foremost have no readers. The reason is simple: without resonance, no one will feel the need or interest to read it.[8] (Yoo Chihwan, 유치환 2007: 161)

As the quoted passages illustrate, for Yoo Chihwan, poetry and the poet are inseparable. Literature, in his view, is fulfilled through each individual's ethical pursuit. In other words, "the transformation of poetry is not achieved through changes in technique, but only when a person's worldview and attitude toward life undergo a fundamental shift" (Hong Jungsun, 홍정선 2000: 144). He rejected the image of the artificially constructed poet, asserting instead that true poetry is born from the vital dynamism that wells up from within ourselves. Therefore, he emphasized that poetry is not the product of calculated experimentation. The poetic subject must internalize the problems of reality and overcome the many contradictions of life through a will formed upon that internalization. For this reason, among his contemporaries, Yoo Chihwan raised his voice more fiercely than anyone else in criticizing the contradictions of reality, such as the corruption of the Liberal Party[9] regime. This piercing self-reflection and determined stance are deeply connected to his way of perceiving the world.

> It is certain that He [God – the one cited, K.H.S.] must by now be dozing somewhere in idleness, or else has vanished without a trace. For, having already fulfilled His role, there is no longer any necessity or reason for Him to remain or to assert His presence. If, on the other hand, He were required to remain eternally – to supervise and remain preoccupied with

[7] "시인이 되기 전에 한 사람이 되리라는 이 쉬웁고 얼마 안 된 말이 내게는 갈수록 감당하기 어려움을 깊이깊이 뉘우쳐 깨다르옵니다." (유치환 1939: 5-6)

[8] "문학이란 언제나 높은 윤리의 태반을 갖지 않고서야 낳아지지가 않기 때문입니다. 윤리를 갖지 않은 글, 윤리의 정신에서 생산되지 않은 문학은 무엇보다 첫째, 그것을 읽어줄 독자가 없을 것입니다. 그 이유는 읽어서 공명을 맛볼 수 없으므로 읽을 필요나 흥미를 아무도 안 느낄 것이기 말입니다." (유치환 1959: 151-152)

[9] The Liberal Party was the ruling party during South Korea's First Republic (1948–1960), led by President Syngman Rhee, and is historically associated with authoritarianism and systemic corruption.

> all things He once commanded into being – then this would merely serve as proof that His creations are, in the end, incomplete, and thus a tacit admission of His own lack of omnipotence.[10] (Yoo Chihwan, 유치환 1984: 345)

> I acknowledge the existence of God. Yet the God I acknowledge is not one who bestows any grace beyond what exists here today, but rather a kind of will that brings into being time and space – and, through them, all things that exist. My God is a formless, overflowing, and ambiguous being. (…) And so, it is precisely today that human beings must, by the clarity of their moral conscience[11] and innate goodness[12], face this absolute will of nihilism head-on and, in so doing, choose the path of their truest selves and chart a course for the future.[13] (Yoo Chihwan, 유치환 1999: 158-159)

For Yoo Chihwan, God may have once existed as the creator of the world, but now he is merely a being who must be off somewhere napping without anything to do, or else has vanished without a trace. God, who created all things, is said to have produced only unfinished products, which serve as proof of his deficient power. This statement underscores Yoo's belief that the influence of God as a creator who controls and watches over us has entirely disappeared in the modern

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[10] "벌써 그(신-인용자) 는 어디에 가서 할 일 없이 낮잠이나 자고 있든지, 그렇찮으면 묘연히 행방을 감춰버리고 말았을 것임에 틀림없다. 왜냐하면 이미 그의 직분을 완수한 그는 구태여 그가 있어야 되고 자신을 내세워야 되는 그럴 필요나 이유조차도 없어지고 만 때문이다. 만약에 그렇찮고 신이 언제나 그가 있어서 일단 그가 있게 명령한 만유를 감시하고 더욱 용념(用念)하여야만 한다면 그것은 그가 창조한 것들이 결국 미완성품이라는 그의 능력의 미급을 자인하는 증좌 밖에 아닌 때문이다." (유치환 1984: 345)

[11] Moral conscience (양지 良知): A Neo-Confucian concept referring to the innate moral awareness or intuitive knowledge of good possessed by every person.

[12] Innate goodness (선성 善性): A philosophical notion emphasizing the fundamental goodness inherent in human nature, often associated with Mencian and Eastern moral thought.

[13] "나는 신의 존재는 인정한다. 내가 인정하는 신이란 오늘 내가 있는 이상의 그 어떤 은총을 베풀 수 있는 신이 아니라 이 시공(時空)과 거기 따라 존재하는 만유(萬有)를 있게 하는 의지 그런 것이다. 나의 신은 형상도 없는 팽배(澎湃) 모호(模糊)한 존재이다. (…) 오늘이야 말로 인간은 그의 양지(良知)와 선성(善性)으로서 이 절대한 허무의 의지를 정시(正視) 인정하므로 진실한 자신의 길을 택하여 앞날을 설계하여야 될 것이다." (유치환 1999: 158-159)

world. God remains only as "a latent will that governs the universe or the world" (Oh Sae-young, 오세영 1999: 226). He no longer intervenes in human life or judges it by standards of good and evil. In the present, God has receded into the order of nature and the cosmos, becoming a shapeless, overflowing, ambiguous being. In this situation, where God has been reduced to a silent cosmic order, there is no one left to oversee the human world. As a result, human beings living in the present feel an ineffable sense of nothingness, for they can no longer be saved through any transcendent other. How, then, is the finite human being to lead their life? This is where Yoo Chihwan's concept of will becomes clearer. Ultimately, the only one who can solve the problems of humanity is humanity itself, and the only way to survive in a godless world is to accept absolute nothingness and solitude, and choose one's true path and plan for the future. This is expressed in his writings as the will to nothingness, a theme he persistently explores in his poetry. The human being, now responsible for managing the world in place of God, must be ethical. And to be ethical, one must embrace the contradictions between good and evil, justice and injustice, finitude and infinity, and nothingness and will. The world cannot be fully understood from just one side of these oppositions. It is from this point that Yoo Chihwan's poetry begins.

When I die, I shall become a single rock,

Unstained by affection,

Unmoved by joy or sorrow,

Chiseled by rain and wind as it may be –

In the unfeeling silence of a million years,

I shall scour inward, ever inward,

Until even life is forgotten.

Though clouds drift above,

Though distant thunder rumbles,

I will not sing, not even in dreams.

Even if split clean in two,

I shall not make a sound –

I shall become a rock.[14]

(Yoo Chihwan, 유치환1984: 77)

In the poem *The Rock (바위)*, images of the infinite and the finite are set in stark opposition, and this tension is mediated through the motif of death. As the line "When I die, I shall become a single rock" suggests, the act of becoming a rock presupposes death. What is thereby attained is an unfeeling silence, in which one remains unstained by affection and unmoved by joy or sorrow – an expression of the speaker's resolute will not to succumb to any form of hardship. The reason the speaker seeks to scour inward, ever inward, to the point of forgetting even life, is that he wishes to embrace new life through death.

This gesture embodies "a life that is affirmed only through total negation" (Choi Dongho, 최동호 1985: 332): for the finite being that is the human, to overcome the contradictions of reality – symbolized by "rain and wind," or "distant thunder" – requires a complete transformation of life, which in turn necessitates a radical break from the existing world. This renewal of life is figured in the lines "I will not sing, not even in dreams. / Even if split clean in two, / I shall not make a sound." Faced with a world of contradiction, the speaker reaches self-affirmation only through a continuous movement of self-negation – a new encounter with life forged in opposition.

However, the task of denying and renewing one's world inevitably entails conflict with the existing order, and as such, cannot be free from pain. This pain, in turn, awakens within the speaker a desire to remain in the world as it is. Hence the urge to remain "silent" in the face of "affection" and "joy or sorrow." For Yoo Chihwan, then, the act of writing poetry becomes an attempt by a finite being to draw near to the infinite. That is to say, the goal is not to become a new god, but rather to continually renew oneself through the mirror of the infinite. It is the will to negate countless contradictions of the world and to make

[14] "내 죽으면 한 개 바위가 되리라/ 아예 애련에 물들지 않고/ 희노에 움직이지 않고/ 비와 바람에 깎이는 대로/ 억 년 비정의 함묵(緘默)에/ 안으로 안으로만 채찍질하여/ 드디어 생명도 망각하고/ 흐르는 구름/ 머언 원뢰(遠雷)/ 꿈꾸어도 노래하지 않고/ 두 쪽으로 깨뜨려져도/ 소리하지 않는 바위가 되리라" (유치환 1984: 77)

that world just slightly better than before.

When my knowledge cannot rescue bitter doubt,

And I too cannot shoulder all the love and hatred of life,

When life strains and shudders like a sickly tree –

Then let me go to the faraway deserts of Arabia.

There, the sun once risen blazes like an immortal,

And all things vanish in sand-bound, eternal silence;

Only Allah, god of the Arab lands,

Wanders and agonizes each night across the burning dunes.

In that ardent solitude,

When I stand alone, robe fluttering in the wind,

I shall, as if by fate, come face to face with "myself."

And if I cannot relearn

The primal, original shape of what I am – what my life is –

Then let my sun-bleached bones rest without regret

Beneath the sands of some nameless dune.[15]

(Yoo Chihwan 유치환 1984: 86)

In *Book of Life, Chapter One (생명의 서(書) 일장(一章))*, the

[15] "나의 지식(知識)이 독한 회의(懷疑)를 구(救)하지 못하고/ 내 또한 삶의 애증(愛憎)을 다 짐지지 못하여/ 병든 나무처럼 생명이 부대낄 때/ 저 머나먼 아라비아의 사막으로 나는 가자// 거기는 한 번 뜬 백일(白日)이 불사신같이 작열(灼熱)하고/ 일체(一切)가 모래 속에 사멸한 영겁의 허적(虛寂)에/ 오직

speaker expresses a "bitter doubt" over his failure to improve the world through his own "knowledge." As a result, he is left struggling "like a sickly tree" and decides to depart for the "deserts of Arabia." However, the desert is not simply a place of escape. It is a space of death, of eternity, of nothingness, where the blazing sun burns "like an immortal" and all things are annihilated in the sand. Only Allah, the god of that land, remains there, wandering and agonizing each night.

What is intriguing is that, even as the speaker is pushed into the desert by the bleakness of reality and experiences fervent solitude, he is confident that he will inevitably come face to face with [him]self, as if by fate. What, then, is this self? Here, it becomes clear that the desert is not merely a site of retreat. The self the speaker seeks to encounter is not his present self but another – one that retains its primal, original shape, untainted by the contradictions of reality. As seen earlier in *"The Rock,"* this journey into the infinite space of the desert serves to annihilate the self steeped in bitter doubt and to recover the life that is I, the pure, primordial being that once was.

Thus, the Arabian desert is not a place of escape but a space for reflection and introspection. The line "Then let my sun-bleached bones rest without regret / Beneath the sands of some nameless dune" expresses the speaker's unwavering will: if he cannot renew himself beyond the contradictions of reality, he would rather accept death than remain unchanged.

This poetic stance also resonates with Yoo Chihwan's own experience in Manchuria. "In 1940, he moved with his family to Xinqu (신구 新區), a village in Yanshou County (연수현 延壽縣), Binjiang Province (빈강성 濱江省), located beneath the Xing'an Mountains (흥안령 興安嶺) east of Harbin. There, he worked as a farm manager until returning to Korea in 1945" (Hong Jungsun, 홍정선 2000: 150). The poems in the collection Book of Life are closely connected to his experiences in northern Manchuria. For Yoo Chihwan, who could not resist the desperate and dismal circumstances of the time and had to leave for Manchuria, it is only natural that he would harbor feelings of bitter doubt and regret. Yet rather than concluding this experience as

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아라—의 신(神)만이/ 밤마다 고민하고 방황하는 열사(熱沙)의 끝// 그 열렬한 고독 가운데/ 옷자락을 나부끼고 호올로 서면/ 운명처럼 반드시 '나'와 대면(對面)케 될지니/ 하여 '나'란 나의 생명이란/ 그 원시의 본연한 자태를 다시 배우지 못하거든/ 차라리 어느 사구(沙丘)에 회한(梅恨) 없는 백골을 쪼이리라" (유치환 1984: 86)

mere escapism or nihilism, he transforms it into an opportunity for renewal – through a process of reflection so intense it borders on self-flagellation.

At the end of this vast plain

near Xing'an Mountains (흥안령 興安嶺) in the northern frontier,

I stand with a heart that refuses to repent, even in death.

Today, for the seventh day, a rain of dark sorrow falls upon it.

Even as I imitate the village ruffian,

flipping over the cards of hwatu,

pressing out my cigarette –

within, my heart endlessly resounds with silent wailing.

Ah – am I once again blaming myself?

Having already renounced all things,

on this path of self-torment

where I refuse even myself,

I could throw away this life,

this life that has failed tenfold.

But alas, there is no place

to cry out this anguished remorse.

Rising in silence,

I open the door and stand,

yet the sky of thoughts I wish to flee into is nowhere in sight.

The nearest train station is two hundred li away –

this wilderness of despair,

shut in by dark mire like an iron wall![16]

(Yoo Chihwan, 유치환1984: 116)

Like the previous poems, *Upon Arriving in the Wilderness (광야에 와서)* is also based on Yoo Chihwan's experience in Manchuria. The speaker, who works as a farm manager in this vast plain near the Xing'an Mountains, feels a deep sense of guilt for having left behind the contradictions of a ravaged reality. He continuously revisits his past faults in order to abandon the mindset that seeks to justify himself – his resolve never to regret even in death. Throwing himself into this path of self-torment, having already abandoned all things, the speaker declares that he is willing to cast away his life of ten failures. As the line "this wilderness of despair, / shut in by dark mire like an iron wall" suggests, the speaker appears trapped in a tragic world from which there is no escape. The future seems foreclosed; only a present time filled with despair remains.

Yet, as we have seen in earlier poems, the reason the speaker applies such severe judgment to himself is in order to face a *new life* through thorough self-reflection. What must be noted here is not the act of self-flagellation itself, but the fact that it is directed entirely inward. The poet's persistent willingness to embrace death, seen throughout Yoo Chihwan's work – this act of metaphorically killing the self – is deeply connected to an ethics of self-reflection. Through such bone-deep reflection, the despairing experiences of northern Manchuria are

[16] "흥안령(興安嶺) 가까운 북변의/ 이 광막한 벌판 끝에 와서/ 죽어도 뉘우치지 않으려는 마음 위에/ 오늘은 이레째 암수(暗愁)의 비 내리고/ 내 망나니에 본받아/ 화툿장을 뒤치고/ 담배를 눌러 꺼도/ 마음은 속으로 끝없이 울리노니/ 아아 이는 다시 나를 과실(過失)함이러뇨/ 이미 온갖을 저버리고/ 사람도 나도 접어주지 않으려는 이 자학의 길에/ 내 열 번 패망의 인생을 버려도 좋으련만/ 아아 이 회오(悔悟)의 앓음을 어디메 호읍(號泣)할 곳 없어/ 말없이 자리를 일어나와 문을 열고 서면/ 나의 탈주할 사념의 하늘도 보이지 않고/ 정차장도 이백 리 밖/ 암담한 진창에 갇힌 철벽 같은 절망의 광야!" (유치환 1984: 116)

transformed into a new possibility for life that can overcome the contradictions of reality. "Because he first directed such harshness toward himself, he could later confront the world and others with a sense of righteous indignation and unwavering moral clarity" (Hong Jungsun, 홍정선 2000: 151). This ethos aligns with Yoo Chihwan's poetics, which valued ethical resolve over poetic form or technique.

> This is a silent outcry –
>
> a handkerchief of eternal nostalgia
>
> waving toward that blue open sea.
>
> Innocence flutters in the wind like waves,
>
> atop the flagpole of a clear and upright ideal.
>
> Sorrow, like an egret, spreads its wings.
>
> Ah, who was it –
>
> who first knew
>
> to hang such a sorrowful and aching heart
>
> in the sky?[17]
>
> (Yoo Chihwan 유치환 1984: 14)

In the poem *Flag (깃발)*, the flag stands firmly on the earth yet waves toward that blue open sea, and at the top of the flagpole of a clear and upright ideal, it spreads its wings like an egret. From this we see that the sea and the sky symbolize an ideal realm where the innocence of a handkerchief of eternal nostalgia flutters in the wind, while the land represents the base reality that fails to achieve it. These two worlds stand in opposition. The fluttering flag continually recalls the desire to return to the ideal world symbolized by home. Then, sorrow spreads its wings like an egret atop the flagpole of a clear and upright ideal. The

[17] "이것은 소리 없는 아우성/ 저 푸른 해원(海原)을 향하여 흔드는/ 영원한 노스탈쟈의 손수건/ 순정은 물결같이 바람에 나부끼고/ 오로지 맑고 곧은 이념의 푯대 끝에/ 애수는 백로처럼 날개를 펴다/ 아아 누구던가/ 이렇게 슬프고도 애달픈 마음을/ 맨 처음 공중에 달 줄을 안 그는" (유치환 1984: 14)

flag hurls itself toward the realm that its ideals point to, yet because it remains bound to the pole rooted in the earth, it cannot break free, and so it spreads its wings in grief.

In summary, the flag embodies the image of a solitary human being who, though tethered to the contradictions of reality (the pole), cannot abandon the yearning for an ideal world. It is a figure suffused with emotions – such as innocence – that had to be let go in the pursuit of ideals or in the experience of their failure. The flag's fluttering captures both the infinite desire symbolized by the sea and sky, and the constraints of repression symbolized by the land to which the pole is bound. Importantly, these opposing forces do not lead to rupture, tearing the flag apart; rather, they intensify its movements into ever more vigorous fluttering. Each time the wind rises, the flag will flutter again, and those who see it will be reminded once more of ideals and nostalgia, reflecting on and continuing their own lives.

In Yoo Chihwan's poetry, transcendence never flows in only one direction. Contradictory forces overlap and collide, generating new possibilities for life. The poet names this process of confronting contradictions and engaging in quiet self-reflection at the core of existence a silent outcry. The flag, then, is not a symbol of despair but a means for redirecting life toward renewal. Because life is complex, there are times when it must release its desires outward and other times when it must conceal them. As these two forces intersect, life becomes more finely differentiated and diverse. The imagination in this poem is "not bound by the tension between ascending and descending forces, nor does it cling to either extreme." (Kim Hyun, 김현 1992: 98) In other words, the tension between the two does not vanish upon reaching one pole or the other; it is a process of renewal that continually affirms the diverse facets of desire and generates new life.

O wave, what am I to do?

O wave, what am I to do?

My beloved stays still, like the land –

O wave, what am I to do?

What am I to do with myself?[18]

[18] "파도야 어쩌란 말이냐/ 파도야 어쩌란 말이냐/ 임은 뭍같이 까딱 않는데/

(Yoo Chihwan, 유치환1984: 205)

This poem, *Longing (그리움)* was written by Yoo Chihwan while thinking of the sijo poet Lee Yeongdo (정운 이영도 丁芸 李永道), who did not return his affections. At the time, Lee was a young widow, and Yoo was a married man, making their relationship socially unacceptable. Unlike the cold, resolute tone often seen in his earlier poems, the speaker here lays bare his aching emotions. While the beloved remains unmoved, like the land, the speaker's longing surges relentlessly, like the waves. The repeated crashing of waves metaphorically expresses the inescapable desperation of his love.

This poem reveals that Yoo Chihwan's poetic world does not rely solely on strength, detachment, or oppositional forces such as meaninglessness versus will. Instead, it embraces both sides – exposing his personal struggles as they are. While he often advocates for a life of will and moral austerity in pursuit of a better world, he does not suppress his own aching passions. For Yoo, poetic ethics mean recognizing that "one cannot live a life sustained solely by sorrowful oppositions" (Kim Hyun, 김현 1992: 99) even inner contradictions must be acknowledged as a valid part of life to become truly human.

4. Conclusion

Kim Sowol and Yoo Chihwan are two emblematic poets who, grounded in contrasting poetic attitudes and worldviews, each gave form to the notion of the "individual" amid the tumultuous period of modernity. Their poetic worlds represent a pivotal literary moment in which Korean lyric poetry began to articulate and define the modern self in language.

Kim Sowol's poetry, while rooted in traditional sentiment and the folk song form, transforms these inherited structures into opportunities for new subject formation through the *internalization of rupture*. The 'I' that emerges in his poems is no longer emotionally fused with the world, but instead becomes self-aware through distance and separation from the other. This self is not passive or resigned; rather, it is an active agent that reconfigures its relationship to the world

파도야 어쩌란 말이냐/ 날 어쩌란 말이냐" (유치환 1984: 205)

through delicate strategies. In this sense, it signifies the emergence of a modern actor through a politics of emotion.

In contrast, Yoo Chihwan's poetic world moves in the opposite direction – he envisions the individual through an expansive meditation on *being constructed from nothingness*. Yoo confronts the existential reality of being cast alone into a world devoid of God and bereft of transcendence. However, this confrontation with meaninglessness is not simply a source of despair; it becomes, for Yoo, the very point of departure for an ethical decision to reconstitute the self. The individual revealed in his poetry is a subject of resolute will, one who strives to live and take full responsibility for that life even without recognition from others or society. This is perhaps the most radical form of the modern self: a being who, through ethical practice and personal renewal, seeks to create a new kind of *singularity* within a godless world.

Thus, whereas Kim Sowol shaped a convergent, affect-centered individual through the internalization of rupture, Yoo Chihwan articulated a divergent individual by embracing existential tension and ethical resolution within the fundamental condition of transcendental absence. The former actively appropriated the affective structures of tradition to establish an inward logic of subject formation, while the latter drew a life-ethic from the depths of nihilism, crafting a dynamic image of the self.

Ultimately, the divergent visions of the "individual" presented by Kim Sowol and Yoo Chihwan serve as critical signposts for understanding how Korean lyric poetry negotiated the tensions between self and world, emotion and thought, tradition and modernity. These two polar approaches encapsulate the ontological evolution Korean poetry underwent in the age of modernity. They show that the "individual" was not merely a vehicle for subjective sentiment, but increasingly came to be understood as a complete and autonomous subject capable of perceiving and intervening in the world.

In this light, the present study aimed to examine the process and scope of individual formation in Korean lyric poetry through a comparative reading of the two poets. This entailed not only a deep engagement with each poet's distinctive world, but also an effort to uncover the relational dynamics between them. The poetic praxis of Kim Sowol and Yoo Chihwan demonstrates how, at the threshold of modernity, Korean lyric poetry linguistically grappled with rupture, nihilism, loss, and rebirth – and in doing so, illuminated the multifaceted evolution of the entity we call the "individual".

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