

ON THE POET, POETRY AND POETICS

BY LIU HONGBIN



Writing poetry is the beginning of internal exile. The spiritual exile of poetry writing eventually leads to physical exile. The poet is either devoured by exile – or its accomplice, death – or else becomes stronger. The poet’s good fortune depends on whether he can accept the fate of exile without resentment. This is what Confucius meant by “know your destiny.” A poet can turn solitude into a personal luxury, or poverty into a boundary stone from which to observe the world of ordinary people. His poverty makes him aware of his plenty at the same time as it embarrasses him in reality; in a more civilized living environment, the poet can escape poverty through his creative labor. As loneliness, poverty, illness and the passage of time accelerate the poet’s advancement to the brink of death, the last words to gurgle in his throat are gratitude and praise.

Writing Chinese poetry in a different time zone, making a foreign country a homeland; when the poet in a foreign land creates a China in the kingdom of his mind, he becomes its

legislator and king. The poet himself is a China. In this world the poet can decisively preserve his personality, and make individualism the basis on which he resists the corruption of his soul. China follows the poet into exile. My own cycle of exile reaches an end.

The poet is the servant of language, and even more the slave of the art of poetry. He hopes for nothing but to give his all to poetry. The political task of a poet is to defend the sacredness of his language. Since the beginning of the 1900s, a number of disasters have befallen the Chinese language under the name of “revolution.” With the Chinese language abused and misused for too long, the poet should be a clinician for this mother tongue. The mission of the contemporary Chinese poet is to build a historical bridge between the glory of Chinese classical poetry and the ruins of modern Chinese language. This is the hope of Chinese poetry in its despair.

In autocratic countries, a poet can be praised as a national hero. I disdain this role. As Joseph Brodsky says, “A poet is a hero in his own myth.”

We are all molded by words, and are written on the world by words. A word can be a world. A poet is both the subject who creates words and the object created by words. In a spirit of humility and humanity, we write and serve the language.

It is every poet’s mission to convert this world to poetry; until then, poetic justice can be done. I have said before, what I use to resist tyranny and evil is not a weapon, but beauty.

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