

interested in exploring the Chinese soul anymore.” He paused, then added, “If I were fifteen years younger, I would return to literature.” His tone of voice was so sincere that I didn’t know how to respond, as I remembered how certain he had once been about his political role.

The first time I’d met him was in the spring of 1989, when I was finishing my dissertation at Brandeis University so that I could return to my teaching position at Shandong University that fall. I was anxious, unsure if China would continue keeping its door open. I had known of several scholars who had earned graduate degrees in the West forty years before, but whose knowledge of our field, English and American literature, had grown obsolete over the decades because they’d never had opportunities to communicate with scholars outside China. One evening in mid-April, together with a friend I called on Mr. Binyan Liu, who was at Harvard that spring. During our conversation I told him my concern, and he assured me that things were improving in China. “Look,” he said, “Su Xiaokang is about to become a vice president of a drama school. Your fear is groundless.” At the time Su Xiaokang was a controversial figure, attacked by the hard-liners, because he had made the TV series *River*

As a result, a part of my reference frame had collapsed. For the first time I was tormented by the monstrous apparition of my native country.

By then I'd had my first volume of poems accepted for publication, but I took this English book only as an excursion because I believed I would write in Chinese eventually. I'd kept in touch with a few friends, poets, in China, and we thought that the Chinese language, polluted by revolutionary movements and political jargon, had reached the stage where changes must be made, and that we could work to improve the poetic language. As a possibility, we might attempt to create a new kind of language for poetry. The immediate effect of the Tiananmen massacre on me was that I would have to revise my personal plan

to go hungry, as we did in our day ...”<sup>1</sup> From that point on, Chekhov began writing longer stories with a clear artistic vision and eventually left us his best works, those small classics of his last decade. As I was reading his letters, it dawned on me that in America, as long as you were healthy and did some work, you wouldn’t go hungry. Artists here could be poor, wretched, and paranoid, but they didn’t starve. Compared to Chekhov’s time and the czarist Russia, we were in a much better situation. Speaking about hunger, I was also deeply affected by Kafka’s story “The Hunger Artist.” The protagonist cannot find normal food that can satisfy his hunger, so he has to fast and take fasting as his art, an art that makes no

Even within this English tradition, writers each have an individual way of existence. It is commonly known that Nabokov disliked Conrad. When people compared him to Conrad, Nabokov would insist that he was different because he had written poetry and fiction in Russian whereas Conrad had never published in Polish. What Nabokov implied was that he had a place in both languages while Conrad existed only in English. Nabokov is a paragon of dual linguistic identity, which few writers can claim. However, we should keep in

the book market and selling points is sheer nonsense, which I have felt too ashamed to heed.

Accusations against me are largely based on the conviction that one must be loyal to one's native country. But loyalty is a two-way street, especially when the individual doesn't rely on China for his or her existence. Why don't we speak about how a country betrays an individual? Has a country ever been loyal to an individual? Why should a country always demand service and sacrifice from the individual? Indeed for a country, the individual is

he would have been able to define his existence without the political context of China. A celebrated exile like him could not conceive his independence from our native country. In that resided his tragedy and honor.

I am sure that Mr. Binyan Liu was aware of the difference between a literary life and a political life—the latter is predicated on power and the collective, without which no political