

William Sibley Symposium  
Opening Remarks by Norma Field  
8 May 2010

It's of course with mixed feeling that any of us goes about planning a memorial occasion for a person held dear. In the course of planning this day, and through communicating with you together and singly, I began to experience, slowly but with increasing sureness, the force of Bill's presence in each of us. And I have become simply grateful to Bill for having brought us together in this way. And seeing all of you, I'm reminded that this is a testimony to the way he lived his life, hardly the mere consequence of the fact of his death.

All of us who knew Bill Sibley were the recipients of his generosity: of his extraordinary learning, never segregated from wisdom; of his whimsical kindness through words and deeds; of his love of music; of his wit, sometimes mordant; of his legendary hospitality. These qualities were as often as not bundled. He once observed that he found himself inviting guests for dinner, anticipating the pleasure of seeing them, then, in the throes of preparation, thoroughly annoyed that they had accepted his invitation. As we know, we—he and his guests—inevitably ended up relishing our time together.

What would be a fitting way to remember and honor Bill at the University of Chicago, where he himself took his degree in 1971? Bill was a gentleman-scholar and teacher, an endangered species. Early in my days here, I observed to him that many or most academics seemed not to be intellectuals. I was speaking out of disillusion and anxiety, in other words, naiveté and a touch of presumption. (I'm also grateful to Bill for giving me this occasion to meet you again, not only aged, but maybe, just maybe, a bit more grown up.) He agreed. But reflecting on Bill now, I'd hesitate to simply assign him the label "intellectual." As all of you know, he brought his full being into the shared labor of reading a text. Let me take a sidestep here to give you an account of such shared labor that just came in from Bill Marotti at UCLA, who couldn't be here today:

[H]e demonstrated that special precision of reading in a way that encouraged his students to redouble their efforts, and begin to grasp what they were missing in the texts. With his level of skill, it would have been simple for Bill to simply have modeled an unattainable ideal, but instead, with infinite patience, Bill encouraged and pushed us to see, and to hear, and to continually improve. With his breadth of knowledge, he also led us into focused contextual readings that—almost paradoxically—expanded our view of the texts well beyond the expectations we brought to them. We learned to follow arguments and references expansively,

stepping over the bounds of genre, of labels, and into a place where the texts could surprise us. I am certain that my own ability to “read” texts was profoundly shaped by Bill Sibley.

As I said, Bill brought everything to his texts, and to his work with students. He hadn't rationalized himself into heart and mind, mental and physical (often as in "culinary") labor.

Bill Sibley was an anachronism. What does that mean? The OED suggests in its etymology that it refers to "anything done or existing out of date; *hence*, anything which was proper to a former age, but is, or if it existed, would be out of harmony with the present." Bill was an anachronism in that he represented a disappearing mode of life—of course inflected by his own distinctive ensemble of qualities—that was in fact essential to our present: a mode so obscured that it went unrecognized by many, was undervalued by still more who (myself included) would rather not confront the questions it posed to our present striving, heartless, and desperate existence. Bill's anachronism was, in other words, a quiet rebuke to that mode; it pulled us back from the brink of impoverishment in harsh times and bestowed grace on such easier times as history affords us. It was a rebuke that reminded us to yearn for harmony in the present, with ourselves as much as with others, by letting us experience the generosity from which it sprang and which it reproduced.

I know that today, we'll be sharing how each of us finds Bill's special brand of anachronism flowing through our own present. So thank you all for having made the immense effort to get here at this busy time of year. To those who didn't know Bill but have joined us today, thank you, too. And my thanks also go to colleagues in the Committee on Japanese Studies and the Department of EALC for making this gathering possible. (Bill Sibley returned to Chicago in 1978 and retired in 2000. He chaired the department of EALC for seven years and the Committee on Japanese Studies for several terms.) Special thanks go to Sarah Arehart, to whom our debt will become only more evident in the course of the day.

Let's begin our day. I asked participants to organize their thoughts around one of two categories vital to Bill, translation and literary studies. That the two, in fact, overlap and merge is testimony to the centrality of Bill's concerns. That the participants come from a variety of disciplines is also testimony to the nature of Bill Sibley's contributions here.

So, without further ado, let's begin with the first panel on the theme of "translation."