

Reflections on Useless Heroes: William F. Sibley's Review of *The Failure of Freedom*

Sarah Frederick

I started at U of C in fall of 1992, and fortunately Bill Sibley was teaching at that time. My first course with him was called "Love, Lust, Work and Play" (though I think in the end he took "lust" out of the title, as he said, "to deter the *tsukebes*"). And then, in the winter quarter, Classical Japanese where we had a great time working on Ugetsu among other things. And also a class on Inoue Hisashi, who just passed away last month. Inoue was supposed to be coming to campus to speak so we read his novels; he didn't show up and the novels suggest some of the reasons why that might have been. While Bill made the occasional deliciously nasty remark about Inoue and various others, as you know, even when making such remarks he was always the gentleman. And he was certainly utterly tolerant of my own intellectual foibles as a young graduate student, feeling all the warmth and generosity expressed already by many today. Probably the biggest personal challenges he presented me with were some nasty hangovers after his notorious parties.

So then I come to my orals a couple years later, and Harry Harootunian asked me to read Arima Tatsuo's *Failure of Freedom* as part of my field on prewar Japanese intellectual history; and he mentioned that Bill had written an excellent review of it, which I dug up in the Regenstein. I don't know how many of you have read this, whether in the past or for the materials for this gathering, but it's not exactly what you'd want to see on your own book. It starts out: "This is an impatient book. It is many

places also intolerant and too often insensitive beyond the bounds of even the more slapdash sort of academic discourse.” And this is followed by the most backhanded “contribution to the field” compliment, I have ever seen: “While neither the author’s choice of specific subjects nor the manner in which they are treated would seem to justify the tendentious title and the pretentious chapter and subchapter headings, the work is no doubt a contribution to its field...”(247).

I haven’t read the book since that time, and was not about to slog through it again – it is rather tedious and certainly tendentious, though not without redeeming sections (as the review also shows). But in short and as best I remember, it lays out the ways that various major thinkers and writers of fiction in the interwar era “failed” to understand the potentials of liberal democracy, and failed in their writings to protect or promote “freedom” as a political category, thus contributing to the nasty direction of Japanese politics that followed. Objects of the book include Nishida Kitaro, Uchimura Kanzo, Osugi Sakae, Arishma Takeo, and Akutagawa Ryûnosuke. As Bill points out and develops, in this *42-page!* review, an array of fascinating thinkers and writers are treated to an account of their inability to follow a “preconceived pattern” based on “the progressive development of the Western liberal democracies” (248). This book “contributed” but also failed as a study because it tries to undermine everything interesting about these figures by mechanically bringing us back to, as Bill nicely puts it, the “futility and folly of the subjects’ intellectual undertakings.”

I think we can all see the failed nature of Arima’s own analytical framework. So to bask in how far we’ve come since 1969 by rehashing a book the same age as I am,

is rather unnecessary perhaps. Still, other than revealing the “dark side” of our mentor here, I wanted to talk about this review, but on some level, I, at least, feel like I have and could fail in some of the same ways (as the both subjects of Sibley and Arima perhaps).

Ultimately those of us, and I know there are many of us in this room more esteemed in this regard than I, who talk about individuals as they operate as creators of art and thought, with concern for the political intentions and effects of those writings and authorial personas, have to grapple with the problem’s raised by this book and its review. How do we bring out what is interesting and politically powerful about a writer’s life without making him or her into a hero or tragic hero who succeeds or fails to live up to some ideal? Or something we can like or dislike because it lives up to our politics, or our audience’s?

Feminist approaches have certainly struggled with this dynamic over the years and the expectations out there also can make it really hard to navigate these waters. I have heard all of “well, that’s not the most radical or progressive or ‘interesting’ (not sure what this means), etc.” person (or in my case sometimes magazine). At the time I first read this review, I was really interested in interwar era feminists, and definitely falling into a sort of evaluative back and forth about what was good or bad about them or their trajectories. For example, how Takamure Itsue’s anarchism ended in a sort of failure later (and I think Yasuko Sato has helped us to think about that)... I was dealing in my mind with such vibrant figures who were very smart, creative, well-meaning and many of whom seemed to have “gone bad” or else “held out” by raising quail and so on.

I am really *moved* by someone raising quail as alternative to writing propaganda, but there are interesting things in nationalist writings in wartime women's magazines too (and even by people who sort of 'held out' – and that's interesting too).

I have encountered this sort of dilemma the most in working on Yoshiya Nobuko – there is in discussions with others a sort of back and forth, she's OK because she inspired or comforted women, not OK because she didn't criticize capitalism, not OK because she supported Japanese imperialism in East Asia, but “well, that's OK because she's a lesbian” etc.

However, as Bill says at one point in the review “But I exaggerate.” No one quite says any of that and it is as if I am setting up straw men in an Arima-esque fashion myself. But still it is *implied* in the logic behind various questions, criticisms, and praise of research I present. Again, all of this we in this room know, but it can be so hard to be *emboldened* to talk about those who are easily turned into heroes or anti-heroes. I look in the review for some suggestions, and I recommend that you do as well, because I cannot capture the complexity of this *long* review here. For example though, on Uchimura Kanzo he writes: “I wonder whether it is not precisely the idiosyncrasy of Uchimura's personality and the lack of immediate social or political relevance in his thought which make him an interesting figure – a man whose intellectual development is particularly revealing on the paradoxical nature of much of modern Japanese (as of Western) culture.” (254) As usual, this is carefully worded. He asks us to eschew “immediate political relevance” in favor of a curious and open-minded pursuit of idiosyncrasy and paradox, which might even reveal a more interesting “political

relevance” altogether.

This fall I attended a lecture by Tomiko Yoda on *shôjo* fashion and texts at Harvard. It filled the room of course, but there was a very creepy dynamic, of the audience laughing at frilly fashions of 1980s Japanese girls and women. I don’t know that this was so much a problem with the talk itself, unless in not anticipating this dynamic well. But there was a strong sense in the room that “obviously” this constituted a “failure of feminism,” or even of Japanese culture – these self-infantilizing girls. I sense behind it all, some implications the inability for the “shôjo” to grow up and follow a heterosexual developmental trajectory and make her fashion or deportment follow some “preconceived pattern” of “progressive development.” This dynamic makes me fear that the *shôjo* line of inquiry could end up, as Bill referred to Arima’s efforts, just “another study of Japan from which there is nothing new and important for *us* to learn, except incidentally.. ... an object lesson in the folly of political apathy and a confirmation of what we already ‘know’ about the inexorable nature of the historical process.” (248)

But perhaps what I most felt most powerfully when rereading this piece in the context that we find ourselves today is Bill’s own refusal to “fail” to act. Arima’s argument is about a sort of cowardice or, maybe just confusion, where these figures failed to act within their context to make it a better world or prevent it from becoming a worse one. As unproductive as this line of thinking turns out to be in that book, I still think we can admire the sense in which Bill did not fail to give his words freely here,

that he told it like it was, in great detail, sometimes devastatingly, and with great eloquence. Because of this, the results are not as dated as the book that is its subject and hold a great deal for us today. This is not to make a simple “hero” of Bill. His use of *that* term was nuanced indeed, as you know. I think we remember him fondly and were intellectually inspired by him for a whole range of reasons that do *not* fall into some predetermined, inexorable trajectory of success, what it is to be a scholar in American academia, to be part of the academic system with all its language of “tracks” and “lines” and “ranks.” He understood those and could help us get on board, if we wanted to. Maybe this review even helped him that way too (he made to me some humble and sheepish intimations to that effect). Not that his amazing translation projects and study of Shiga do not constitute incredibly sustained and grand efforts. But for most of us, it was the sometimes idiosyncratic, always brilliant marginalia or apparently soft-lob of a question that comes back to mind years later to make you say “aha”, or a beautiful turn of phrase, or an utterly practical method of parsing a Japanese sentence, or an off-handed and sometimes life-changing “oh, have you read x?” that all echo to this day, through the minds of the people in this room and beyond, as utterly *unpretentious* contributions to the field.

William F. Sibley. Review of *The Failure of Freedom: A Portrait of Modern Japanese Intellectuals* by Arima Tatsuo. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 31 (1971). 247-285.