

Where Have You Gone, Stephen Jay Gould?

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In their famous plea for the return of a hero long gone, Paul Simon and Art Garfunkle both captured and immortalized the feelings of a people abandoned by their departed champion. In those times when we feel robbed of our guiding light, when we find ourselves drowning in an endless sea of confusion and hysteria, we might well recall the words of the two songwriters because we are too weak and in too much despair to create our own hero. The passing of Stephen Jay Gould in May 2002 was such a time. With the death of Gould, the public lost a voice, lost an advocate, lost a trustworthy companion and a close friend. How fitting, then, that Stephen Jay Gould borrowed Simon and Garfunkle's phrase to address Joe DiMaggio, a personal hero.

Gould made an archaeological career out of being the public's scientist, and quite a career it was. But the focus of this essay is neither a history of Gould's career, nor a biographical sketch of the man he was, but rather a consideration of the way he manipulatively usurped and craftily maintained this title throughout his writings, in particular his writings that were treasured most dearly by the masses—his reflections on America's pastime, collected and republished in *Triumph and Tragedy in Mudville: A Lifelong Passion for Baseball*.

Gould opens the collection with an introductory essay entitled "Seventh Inning Stretch: Baseball, Father, and Me," claiming that he has "loved and followed baseball all my conscious life" for no apparent reason: "After all, one loves what one loves" (26). He asserts that he has, over the course of his life "developed personal answers to...major questions so often hurled at academics and other professional intellectuals as challenges their baseball commitments" (26) and suggests in no uncertain terms that his readers are more likely than not to identify with his experiences, observations, and conclusions. Gould thus sets the tone for the entire book. He is writing as a fan, as an enthusiast, first, a chance product of his generation, familial heritage, and

geographic location, and as a scientist second, his brilliant insights and astute reflections neither dulled nor diminished by relegating science to this auxiliary status.

I suspect, however, that Gould could have chosen to write about baseball even if he had absolutely no interest in the sport, and that he could have pulled it off all the same. He was a master of the colloquial pen, and he was willing to do whatever it took to establish a relationship with his readers. Unabashed and unashamed by the scorn heaped on him by his academic peers, his was the voice of the masses, and he was going to write what they needed to hear. Gould's professional success depended on his ability to communicate with his audience, an adroitness rivaled by no one else in his field. He was able absolutely to convince his readers that, "although [he] might be an academic by trade, [he wrote] primarily as a fan" ("Mantle" 95). At the same time, he was able to cultivate his audience's trust in him and couple this trust with serious misgivings about the rest of the scientific community, those "overextended, even silly, speculat[ors]" ("Holding" 146).

Much of Gould's baseball-related writing falls neatly into one of two categories: reminiscent, experience-based writing, and scientific, statistics-based writing. Each type of essay serves Gould's larger purpose (that of establishing himself as the public's scientist) in a distinct way. Time and time again throughout his experience-based work, Gould will remind his readers that he was raised from immigrant backgrounds in the apartments of 1950s New York City and that his is a lifelong love of the game. He cherishes his recollections of Mantle and DiMaggio and Larson, and he felt stabbed in the back when the Giants and Dodgers migrated westward. He quotes regularly from "boy-talk between April and October in Queens" ("Stretch" 34). He recollects spaldeens—"those smooth, hollow, pink rubber balls made by the A.G Spalding company" as the "sine qua non of boy play" ("Streetball" 39). He recounts umpire Babe Pinelli's perfectly controversial call in the fifth game of the 1956 World Series as "his finest, his most perceptive, his most truthful moment" ("Final Strike" 47). He declares, in pitiable grief, that the former New York franchises "broke our hearts" when they moved to California in 1958, "and then ceased to exist" ("Freud" 78). There is no length to which Gould will not go in his effort to portray himself as an Everyman, as just another aficionado with whom every single one of his readers can identify in some way. And he became so adept at reading his audience, he so precisely knew their behavior and idiosyncrasies, that he was able to use this knowledge to his advantage.

“Look, I’m a Yankee fan...” Gould writes, “The Red Sox, in other words, began as my mortal enemies...But this year I was with you all the way” (“Best of Times” 50). It seems impossible to fathom that a recognized scholar and published author would even attempt to make a claim like that. A Yankee devotee simply cannot root for the Red Sox! If the New York public had ever discovered this, Gould would have been ostracized! But they wouldn’t know, at least not until much later, because the essay was published in the *Harvard Crimson*. Gould could not only get away with such blasphemy, he could also build and develop his relationship with the Boston public where he lived at the time. Gould’s assertion of a double loyalty is the quintessence of his malleable voice. Because he stands to gain more loyal Boston readers than he may lose, he adjusts his loyalty and his perspective to better match those of his readers.

His science-based articles, on the other hand, display Gould’s sure-handedness and his skill at proving his scientific point without inundating his audience with jargon. Using data compiled on his own and by others, he authoritatively discusses the significantly higher batting averages enjoyed by lefties in the major leagues, the disappearance of .400 hitters (and decline of distinguishable excellence among hitters in general), the evolution of universal creation myths in light of Abner Doubleday and Cooperstown, and the statistical improbability—if not impossibility—that was Joe DiMaggio’s fifty-six game hitting streak, all in an artistic synthesis of lay diction and mathematical clarity. He concisely summarizes his points when he feels he may have lost his audience: “To reiterate...” (“Holding” 150), “I can now state, in a few sentences, my theory...” (“.400” 158), “The end result is the same...” (“Creation Myths” 190). Gould catches and admonishes himself when he feels that he has digressed past the point of his readers’ attention. After discussing Mickey Mantle’s statistics in such depth as to cover everything *from* his speed *to* his ability *to* drag-bunt *to* his success rate of stolen bases and implying the wondrous impact a player of Mantle’s skill might have in today’s game, Gould admits, “But enough. You can carry abstract analysis so far” (“Mantle” 95). Following a tangential discourse comparing the lack of .400 hitters in the modern game with the tragically premature death of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Gould catches and pokes fun at himself: “Enough. I’m waxing lugubrious, despite promises to the contrary” (“.400” 171). And, when he finds himself caught up in artistic diatribe about Man’s inclination to find meaning and importance in nature’s “largely random patterns,” Gould offers sheepishly, “Sorry to wax so poetic and tedious...pointyheadedness in action, I suppose” (“Streak of Streaks” 182). Yet he always makes sure his readers do

not feel patronized as a result of his colloquialism and clarity, apologizing regularly for his “appeal[s] to philistinism” (“Holding” 148).

But Gould not only uses his science-based writings to establish himself among his readers as an authority in his field, he also establishes a platform from which to issue cutting remarks about his peers. Gould was not well-liked among his scientific colleagues, perhaps stemming directly from their envy of his literary and communications skills (consider “The Apotheosis of Stephen Jay Gould,” an obituary work by Paul Gross published in the October 2002 edition of *The New Criterion*, four pages of spiteful rhetoric for the man whose ideas Gross perceived as “sham inquiry,” “so confused as to be hardly worth dealing with,” and as “billowing clouds of verbal flatulence”). The feelings were reciprocated. Quoting a study by John McLean and Francis Ciurczak in which the two professors propose a relationship between lefties’ batting averages and the improved dexterity among lefties in general, Gould charges, “They conclude, in typically dense, but decipherable, scientific prose: ‘This relative but pervasive lack of lateralization in left-handers may in some manner contribute to the motor function of the nondominant hand, thereby enhancing a dexterity that clearly requires the concert of both hands’” (“Holding” 148). Teetering on getting carried away with his verbal assault on “faddist thinking,” he explicitly accuses his peers of “substitut[ing] strained and far-fetched explanations for simple common sense” (143). The implications are clear. The scientific community, Gould is telling us, has survived by maintaining shrouds of tortuous diction and byzantine syntax impervious to the ordinary person. Lest we get confused and overwhelmed, thereby succumbing once again to their ridiculous theories and unsubstantiated rhetoric, we should allow Stephen Jay Gould to translate and expose for us the fallacies of their explanations. It is to him we can turn when the waters of scientific terminology threaten to rise above our heads.

Gould takes the time over and over to remind us who he is and what he has to offer. He is one of us; he’s Stephen from down the block or from the next building over. He earns our confidence by proving over and over that he has more in common with each of his readers than he ever will with any of his scientific peers. He keeps his work understandable, his ideas unmuddled, and his personality spread on every page.

An age of scientific revolution as complex as any in the history of mankind, ours presents the prospect of a long and winding road ahead. We spent the last few decades under the careful guidance and tutelage of a man who dedicated his life to being the public’s navigator across otherwise confusing terrain. So, while we must now go it alone pending the emergence of

another public advocate in the scientific forum, we must first pause to realize all that Stephen Jay Gould accomplished during his tenure in that role. He was an archaeologist, a pointyheaded academic biologist, a statistics-obsessed paleontologist, for sure, but he was a fan first—not just of the game of baseball but of his reciprocatingly adoring audience as well.

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