Books

Review: *I Have Landed: The End of a Beginning in Natural History*

By Stephen Jay Gould '67GSAS. (Harmony Books)

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The title of Stephen Jay Gould’s last collection of essays echoes a notation his immigrant grandfather scribbled upon arriving at Ellis Island. At the end of the first essay, Gould writes: “I have finally won the right to restate your noble words, and to tell you that their inspiration still lights my journey. I have landed. But I also can’t help wondering what comes next!”

Gould died last May at the age of sixty after a long struggle with cancer. He was a world-renowned Harvard paleontologist and evolutionary theorist, the author of 22 books and countless essays, articles, and reviews. *I Have Landed: The End of a Beginning in Natural History* brings together the last of the essays he wrote for *Natural History* magazine. Despite what he calls his “full trust and knowledge of probability,” Gould concedes that, after 25 years of writing a total of 300 monthly essays (“without a single interruption for cancer, hell, high water, or the World Series”), and with the simultaneous publication of his 1,400-page masterwork *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*—all on the 100th anniversary of his grandfather’s having “landed” in America (September 11, 1901)—“something must be beaming me a marching order to move on to other scholarly and literary matters (but never to slow the pace or lose an iota of interest—for no such option exists within my temperament).”

I Have Landed is quintessential Gould. The essays in this collection continue his 25-year-old project of explaining the conceptually difficult (and often misunderstood) subject of evolutionary theory, but he also delves into misconceived divisions

between art and science, the “paleontology of ideas,” and “mini intellectual biographies.” No matter what the topic, Gould’s signature voice, authoritative yet disarming, draws the reader into the complexity and clarity of argument he is always striving for as a writer and a scientist. He is the public intellectual of the popular essay who believes, he says, “that the conceptual depth of technical and general writing should not differ, lest we disrespect the interest and intelligence of millions of potential readers.”

Still, Gould demands that the reader meet him more than halfway. His essay “What Does the Dreaded ‘E’ Word Mean Anyway?” points out that Darwin’s single use of the word “evolved” at the end of the *Origin of Species* could not have meant the “predictable ‘progress’ in the usual sense of cosmic or general ‘betterment’” that Westerners understand as evolution, “for the mechanism of natural selection only yields increasing adaptation to changing . . . unpredictable . . . local environments.” Indeed, Gould reminds us, the sun—in a stellar, as opposed to biological, “evolution”—is evolving toward its own spectacular climax, perhaps to be witnessed by only “mute” and indestructible bacteria. Gould’s point, however, is not simply that “we’ve misunderstood evolution.” The essay pushes to a further position on alternative worldviews. Evolution is not an all-encompassing scientific term; biological evolution and cosmological evolution will demonstrate that. Rather, Gould’s argument is one of exposing, understanding, and accepting the complexities of “legitimate differences, and in explicating the good reasons behind the disparity of use.”

Readers of Gould’s *Rocks of Ages* (1999) will be familiar with his principle of Non-Overlapping Magisteria (NOMA). By this Gould suggests that the mutually respectful disciplines of science and religion should each recognize that as *magisteria* (a domain of authority) they are places within which dialogues and debates are held (as opposed to a *majesty*, in front of whom one kneels in silence and awe) while at the same time accepting that as a result of quantifiable differences in each *magisterium*, they neither overlap nor “encompass all inquiry.” This principle, while not repeated explicitly in *I Have Landed*, drives the book. In essays that take up subjects as intriguing as Nabokov’s lepidoptery and Friedrich Tiedemann’s equality of race theory, and as predictable (for Gould) as baseball and art, Gould is always at work, it seems, documenting layers of complexity for the sake of clarity, differences for the sake of their common truth. Perhaps it’s not so odd that the paleontologist should approach any subject as though he were studying a unique lineage present in

a snail’s whorl.

These essays truly are “attempts,” problems set out, worked through, and solved with as much evidence as Gould has available—and he always has a great deal available. It is, then, in so many ways unfortunate that I Have Landed means we have come to the end of Stephen Jay Gould’s remarkable *Wanderjahre*. Yet, those readers on various paths who have always sought him out will be happy to revel one more time in Gould’s Odyssean twists and turns of argument that always, somehow, find their way home.

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