A Gouldian valediction, almost

The Lying Stones of Marrakech: Penultimate Reflections in Natural History
by Stephen Jay Gould
Jonathan Cape: 2000. 372 pp. £17.99, $25.95

Henry Gee

Does the world really need another collection of Stephen Jay Gould's essays? *The Lying Stones of Marrakech* is the ninth, and its subtitle — *Penultimate Reflections in Natural History* — imply (nay, demand) a tenth. This will mark Gould's retirement (in 2001) from his 28-year stint as the unfailing monthly columnist for *Natural History* (the magazine of the American Museum of Natural History), even though *Lying Stones* contains miscellany such as sleeve notes to a CD of Mozart's music. (This gives Gould yet another opportunity to discuss contingency: what would have happened had Mozart lived to a ripe old age — what wonderful music would we have never heard? But what would the world have been like had he died even sooner?) But even Gould's barrel-scrapings are better than most other people's best efforts, so one mustn't grumble.

But when the *Ultimate Reflections* have coruscated into the empyrean welkin (I think I'm getting the hang of the polyglot agglutinative richness of the English language, don't you?), will that be the end of Gould's contributions to literature? Contingency aside (any of us could be run over by a bus tomorrow), I can see a minor industry of Gouldian *recyclismus* looming. *Ultimate Reflections* will be followed by *Life's Wonderful Rich Grandeur*, a collection of the best of Gould's essays from his previously published cornucopia; further collections of essays they haven't squeezed into this collection; another collection of miscellany, and a collection of Gould's own introductions to these collections. By then, this small library will have appeared in paperback, giving the opportunity for another collection of this self-generating *oeuvre*. As T. S. Eliot never wrote: in the room the publishers come and go/ towards *absurdam*, *reductio*.

Amid this unending valediction, Gould will still produce the occasional straight book. There hasn't been an autobiography (*The Horologist in the Museum: Memoirs of a Mollusc-Hunting Man*), and a learned treatise on the obsessional statistics of baseball (*Say It Ain't So, Joe*) can't be far off. When Gould uses some extended anecdote about baseball as a prolegomenon (hah! I'm at it again!) to a homily on evolution, I put up with it. But in *Lying Stones* we have essays seemingly without number (well, only one, but it seems like more) on baseball, unalloyed. Now, I am a pronounced sportsphobe, and would have agreed with those patricians who damned such things as *panem et circenses* (kitchenware and circumcision, according to my own translation), fit only for those poor souls who must make do with sentimentality rather than sentiment. And baseball is the basest of balls. Even duller than cricket, if that were possible, it has none of the spurious elegance of that dreary pastime: the *longueurs* of baseball consist of overweight men wearing silly uniforms, looking disagreeable, hugging their crotches and spitting a lot. It is a shame that Gould, a writer with such a deep intellectual life, feels the need to slum it in public. But *chacun à son gout*, as we Brits say. Again, mustn't grumble.

If I have one literary fault, it is digression, so I'll return to the rhetorical question I posed at the start and, in a spirit of paradox (because, hey, I'm that kinda guy) try to answer it. *Lying Stones* doesn't really say anything Gould hasn't said before, many times, and often more succinctly: the importance of contingency; the mysteries of the fossil record; man's inhumanity to man; celebrations of little-known (or misunderstood) figures from the pageant of science past, and so on. But each essay adds some tiny variation to the canon, and even if you know the ending, you can enjoy the minutely interesting detail along the way, not to mention Gould's commanding scholarship.

So, no, the world doesn't really need another collection of Gould's essays. But the world could also manage tolerably well without redbreasts whistling from garden crofts, or gathering swallows twittering in the skies: and (to be contingent) if Gould had become a tailor, or even a baseball player, and had never written a line, the world would be impoverished indeed. ■

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Covering all the bases: Joe DiMaggio, unwittingly a big hitter for evolutionary metaphor.

The many faces of science

Defining Features: Scientific and Medical Portraits 1660–2000
by Ludmilla Jordanova
Reaktion Books & National Portrait Gallery: 2000. 192 pp. £14.95, $24.95 (pbk)

Lisa Jardine

The cover of Ludmilla Jordanova's new book carries an engraving of the nineteenth-century astronomer William Herschel. The great man is portrayed in three-quarters profile, hair swept back from a high forehead (which for verisimilitude sports a small pimple), his large-collared greatcoat buttoned across his broad chest, sharp shadows angling his face. He is the archetypal figure of the eighteenth-century Romantic hero. Behind him a crescent moon rises above leafless trees in a dramatic night sky spangled with stars.

Appearances, however, as Jordanova explains, can be deceptive. This is not a portrait of a romantic dreamer, but of an

energetic doer — a successful man of science. In the exhibition of portraits of scientists at the National Portrait Gallery in London (running until 17 September), which provided the occasion for Jordanova's book, the point is made even more clearly. Underneath the original Herschel print is a legend, written in swirling copperplate script. It tells us that the background shows, specifically, "part of the constellation of Gemini, with a telescopic aspect of the Georgium Sidus as it was discovered by Dr Herschel at Bath the 13th of March 1781 in consequence of which he was soon introduced to the most gracious patronage of His Majesty King George III".

The "Georgium Sidus" was the name Herschel gave — a compliment to his patron George III of England — to the new planet Uranus, which he discovered in the constellation Gemini using a seven-foot reflecting telescope that he had designed and built himself. This, then, is a tribute to the astronomer's greatest discovery, as well as a record of his features. And he is celebrated here as much for his mundane fund-raising success with the king — a keen amateur enthusiast for science — as for the spiritual high-mindedness of his astronomy.

Throughout history, people have been fascinated by what famous people look like. Before television, the portrait and the print satisfied this curiosity. Jordanova draws on the Wellcome Institute's extensive collection of Edward Jenner memorabilia to show how the face of the man who discovered inoculation against smallpox graced the walls and mantelpieces of even the humblest of a grateful public's homes. As in Herschel's case, what distinguishes the scientist from other celebrities in this respect is that, where the politician might hold a pen and the musician his instrument, the scientist's portrait is likely to allude to the scientific breakthrough itself. In Jenner's case, a cow and a milkmaid figure in almost every picture.

In what is probably the most interesting part of Jordanova's sometimes rather basic study, she discusses some of the more dubious ways in which women scientists have been portrayed for posterity. Here the tension between scientific achievement and the conventions of female virtue — passivity, docility and acquiescence, represented by demure dress and downcast eyes — is acute. Herschel's sister and scientific collaborator, Caroline, is represented demurely handing her brother a cup of tea, or primly bonneted, without a scientific instrument in sight.

Among the arresting portraits of Nobel prizewinner Dorothy Hodgkin that Jordanova reproduces, only Maggi Hambling's powerful 1985 oil painting shows the distinguished chemist and crystallographer with the tools of her trade. The others show her in film-star pose — her beauty apparently more significant than her scientific brilliance.

Even that most celebrated of women ambassadors for the scientific profession (as current president of Britain's Royal Institution), the neuropharmacologist Susan Greenfield, is portrayed with emphasis on her good looks rather than her scientific expertise. Which makes the new portrait commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery, and forming the centrepiece of the current exhibition, all the more interesting.

Portrait of the scientist: Tom Phillips' video-based study of Royal Institution president Susan Greenfield.

For Greenfield's portrait, Royal Academy portraitist Tom Phillips, whose conventional portrait of mathematician Peter Goddard also features in the exhibition and book, has moved into new media. The portrait consists of a 15-minute loop, run on a Macintosh G4 computer, with a DVD driver. Its 22,500 frames are based on 169 drawings on paper, graphics onto screen, and short video sequences. The result is a compelling, elusive portrait that conveys physical traits and mental innovativeness simultaneously. Here is a scientist whose gender is irrelevant, but whose intellectual curiosity is captured in the semi-abstract, constantly changing representation. Greenfield's shadowy face comes in and out of view through a filmy curtain of thought-provoking visual allusions.

The reproductions in this beautifully produced book capture much of the spirit of the exhibition it accompanies. Jordanova's text is occasionally ponderous, and she has lost some of the exhibition's buzz. But she succeeds in stimulating a fresh discussion of scientific portraiture. After this, we will all look with keener eyes at those familiar portraits that adorn the walls of the Royal Society or hang in splendour, tier upon tier, in the Royal College of Physicians. ■

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New Journals

This year, *Nature*'s annual new journals review supplement will appear in the issue of 21 September. Publishers and learned societies are invited to submit journals for review, taking note of the following criteria:

- Journals must have first appeared during or after June 1998 and have published at least four separate numbers by the end of May 2000.
- Journals covering any aspect of science are eligible, although those dealing with clinical medicine and pure mathematics are excluded, as are newsletters and publications of abstracts.
- Frequency of publication must be at least three times a year.
- The main language must be English.
- The deadline for submission is 5 June.

Please send at least four different issues (the first, the most recent and any two others) of each eligible title, or access details of any eligible electronic journal, together with full details of subscription rates, to: Isobel Flanagan, *Nature*, Porters South, Crinan Street, London N1 9XW, UK. Tel: +44 (0)20 7843 4542. e-mail: i.flanagan@nature.com