

Commentary

Stephen Jay Gould

To begin with, the press the poor man's death has received in the United States is somewhat extraordinary. The New York Times had a good obituary which was even reprinted in the local newspaper here. Not only huge photographs of him, but more than once I read that his importance is equal to that of Darwin – he is the 20th century Darwin. Clearly his popularity has been immense.

As far as his science goes I do not think he has made any major original contribution. This is rather sad because I think he wished that more than anything. He pinned great hopes on his punctuated equilibrium, but I tend to agree with those that think it is worthy to point out that the speed of evolutionary change is variable, but that it is no great new principle. By contrast, to my mind the giant of evolutionary biology in the 20th century is William Hamilton; he did open up a new paradigm.

I think Steve's greatest strength is as a historian of biology. His wide and intelligent reading in many languages and his understanding the work he is discussing in terms of the thinking of the time is exemplary. A good example is his *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* which I think is a wonderful book. In fact to reinforce my point above, the only weak part of the book is where he tries to do something original, that is, his clock model.

As a writer, for which he is best known, I have mixed feelings. Sometimes I enjoy it hugely, and other times I find it too lush, too overwritten, as though it were gushing forth from an uncontrollable spigot. I have heard him give wonderful lectures: insightful, elegant and beautifully fashioned. I have also heard him give lectures that seem to me to be just the opposite: shallow, self promoting and fundamentally uninteresting. One thing should be said about his science, his writing, and his lecturing – he loved to argue. He had a distinct tendency to debate like a lawyer or a Talmudic scholar.

As a person, while I saw little of him over the years, I liked him very much. He was always pleasant, cheerful, amusing and very bright – he was good company.

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