Suggestions for Writing

A. Both St. Francis of Assisi and Galileo shook the thinking of the established church. Given Gould's position in evolution/creation controversies, challenged or misquoted by biblical literalists and by some traditional evolutionists, his choice to contrast the thinking of these particular historical figures reflects his own embattled position as a science writer. Research one of the controversies that Gould, Galileo, or St. Francis has been involved in and write a report that outlines both sides of the controversy and the intellectual and social ramifications of each side. You needn't be "objective."

B. Choose a subject in the natural world with which you are familiar. Try writing about it as a Franciscan thinker might, then as a Galilean. Also write about your writing process in each case. Which did you find easier? In what specific ways was the writing different?

Flaws in a Victorian Veil

1 The Victorians left some magnificent, if lengthy, novels. But they also foisted upon an apparently willing world a literary genre probably unmatched for tedium and inaccurate portrayal: the multivolumed "life and letters" of eminent men. These extended encomiums, usually written by grieving widows or dutiful sons and daughters, masqueraded as humbly objective accounts, simple documentation of words and activities. If we accepted these works at face value, we would have to believe that eminent Victorians actually lived by the ethical values they espoused—a fanciful proposition that Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* put to rest more than fifty years ago.

2 Elizabeth Cary Agassiz—eminent Bostonian, founder and first president of Radcliffe College, and devoted wife of America's premier naturalist—had all the right credentials for authorship (including a departed and lamented husband). Her *Life and Correspondence of Louis Agassiz* turned a fascinating, cantankerous, and not overly faithful man into a paragon of restraint, statesmanship, wisdom, and rectitude.

3 I write this essay in the structure that Louis Agassiz built in 1859—the original wing of Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology. Agassiz, the world's leading student of fossil fishes, pro-

tégé of the great Cuvier left his native Switzerland for an American career in the late 1840s. As a celebrated European and a charming man, Agassiz was lionized in social and intellectual circles from Boston to Charleston. He led the study of natural history in America until his death in 1873.

4 Louis's public utterances were always models of propriety, but I expected that his private letters would match his ebullient personality. Yet Elizabeth's book, ostensibly a verbatim report of Louis's letters, manages to turn this focus of controversy and source of restless energy into a measured and dignified gentleman.

5 Recently, in studying Louis Agassiz's views on race and prompted by some hints in E. Lurie's biography *(Louis Agassiz: a life in science)*, I encountered some interesting discrepancies between Elizabeth's version and Louis's original letters. I then discovered that Elizabeth simply expurgated the text and didn't even insert ellipses (those annoying three dots) to indicate her deletions. Harvard has the original letters, and a bit of sleuthing on my part turned up some spicy material.

6 During the decade before the Civil War, Agassiz expressed strong opinions on the status of blacks and Indians. As an adopted son of the north, he rejected slavery, but as an upper crust Caucasian, he certainly didn't link this rejection to any notion of racial equality.

7 Agassiz presented his racial attitudes as sober and ineluctable deductions from first principles. He maintained that species are static, created entities (at his death in 1873, Agassiz stood virtually alone among biologists as a holdout against the Darwinian tide). They are not placed upon the earth in a single spot, but created simultaneously over their entire range. Related species are often created in separate geographic regions, each adapted to prevailing environments of its own area. Since human races met these criteria before commerce and migration mixed us up, each race is a separate biological species.

8 Thus, America's leading biologist came down firmly on the wrong side of a debate that had been raging in America for a decade before he arrived: Was Adam the progenitor of all people or only of white people? Are blacks and Indians our brothers or merely our look-alikes? The *polygenists*, Agassiz among them, held that each major race had been created as a truly separate species;

the *monogenists* advocated a single origin and ranked races by their unequal degeneration from the primeval perfection of Eden—the debate included no egalitarians. In logic, separate needn't mean unequal, as the victors in Plessy vs. Ferguson argued in 1896. But, as the winners in Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education maintained in 1954, a group in power always conflates separation with superiority. I know of no American polygenist who did not assume that whites were separate *and* superior.

9 Agassiz insisted that his defense of polygeny had nothing to do with political advocacy or social prejudice. He was, he argued, merely a humble and disinterested scholar, trying to establish an intriguing fact of natural history.

> It has been charged upon the views here advanced that they tend to the support of slavery. . . . Is that a fair objection to a philosophical investigation? Here we have to do only with the question of the origin of men; let the politicians, let those who feel themselves called upon to regulate human society, see what they can do with the results. . . . We disclaim all connection with any question involving political matters. . . . Naturalists have a right to consider the questions growing out of men's physical relations as merely scientific questions, and to investigate them without reference to either politics or religion.

10 Despite these brave words, Agassiz ends this major statement on race (published in the *Christian Examiner,* 1850) with some definite social recommendations. He begins by affirming the doctrine of separate and unequal: "There are upon earth different races of men, inhabiting different parts of its surface . . . and this fact presses upon us the obligation to settle the relative rank among these races." The resulting hierarchy is self-evident: "The indomitable, courageous, proud Indian—in how different a light he stands by the side of the submissive, obsequious, imitative negro, or by the side of the tricky, cunning, and cowardly Mongolian! Are not these facts indications that the different races do not rank upon one level in nature." Finally, if he hadn't made his political message clear by generalization, Agassiz ends by advocating specific social policy—thus contravening his original pledge to abjure politics for the pure life of the mind. Education, he argues, must be tailored to innate ability; train blacks in hand work, whites in mind work.

> What would be the best education to be imparted to the different races in consequence of their primitive difference. . . . We entertain not the slightest doubt that human affairs with reference to the colored races would be far more judiciously conducted if, in our intercourse with them, we were guided by a full consciousness of the real differences existing between us and them, and a desire to foster those dispositions that are eminently marked in them, rather than by treating them on terms of equality.

11 Since these "eminently marked" dispositions are submissiveness, obsequiousness, and imitation, we can well imagine what Agassiz had in mind.

12 Agassiz had political clout, largely because he spoke as a scientist, supposedly motivated only by the facts of his case and the abstract theory they embodied. In this context, the actual source of Agassiz's ideas on race becomes a matter of some importance. Did he really have no ax to grind, no predisposition, no impetus beyond his love for natural history? The passages expurgated from *Life and Correspondence* shed considerable light. They show a man with strong prejudices based primarily on immediate visceral reactions and deep sexual fears.

13 The first passage, almost shocking in its force, even 130 years later, recounts Agassiz's first experience with black people (he had never encountered blacks in Europe). He first visited America in 1846 and sent his mother a long letter detailing his experiences. In the section about Philadelphia, Elizabeth Agassiz records only his visits to museums and the private homes of scientists. She expunges, without ellipses, his first impression of blacks—a visceral reaction to waiters in a hotel restaurant. In 1846 Agassiz still believed in human unity, but this passage exposes an explicit, stunningly nonscientific basis for his conversion to polygeny. For the first time, then, without omissions:

> It was in Philadelphia that I first found myself in prolonged contact with negroes; all the domestics in my hotel were men of color. I can scarcely express to you the painful impression that I received, especially since the sentiment that they inspired in me is contrary to all our ideas about the confraternity of the human type and the unique origin of our species. But truth before all. Nevertheless, I experienced pity at the sight of this degraded and degenerate race, and their lot inspired compassion in me in thinking that they are

> really men. Nonetheless, it is impossible for me to repress the feeling that they are not of the same blood as us. In seeing their black faces with their thick lips and grimacing teeth, the wool on their head, their bent knees, their elongated hands, their large curved nails, and especially the livid color of the palms of their hands, I could not take my eyes off their faces in order to tell them to stay far away. And when they advanced that hideous hand towards my plate in order to serve me, I wished I were able to depart in order to eat a piece of bread elsewhere, rather than to dine with such service. What unhappiness for the white race—to have tied their existence so closely with that of negroes in certain countries! God preserve us from such a contact!

14 The second set of documents comes from the midst of the Civil War. Samuel Howe, husband of Julia Ward Howe (author of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*) and a member of President Lincoln's Inquiry Commission, wrote to ask Agassiz his opinion about the role of blacks in a reunited nation. During August 1863, Agassiz responded in four long and impassioned letters. Elizabeth Agassiz bowdlerized them to render Louis's case as a soberly stated opinion (despite its peculiar content), derived from first principles and motivated only by a love of truth.

15 Louis argued, in short, that races should be kept separate lest white superiority be diluted. This separation should occur naturally since mulattoes, as a weak strain, will eventually die out. Blacks will leave the northern climates so unsuited to them (since they were created as a separate species for Africa); they will move south in droves and will eventually prevail in a few lowland states, although whites will maintain dominion over the seashore and elevated ground. We will have to recognize these states, even admit them to the Union, as the best solution to a bad situation; after all, we do recognize "Haity and Liberia."

16 Elizabeth's substantial deletions display Louis's motivation in a very different light. They radiate raw fear and blind prejudice. She systematically eliminates three kinds of statements. First, she omits the most denigrating references to blacks: "In everything unlike other races," Louis writes, "they may but be compared to children, grown in the stature of adults, while retaining a childlike mind." Second, she removes all elitist claims about the correlation of wisdom, wealth, and social position within races. In these passages, we begin to sense Louis's real fears about miscegenation.

> I shudder from the consequences. We have already to struggle, in our progress, against the influence of universal equality, in consequence of the difficulty of preserving the acquisitions of individual eminence, the wealth of refinement and culture growing out of select associations. What would be our condition if to these difficulties were added the far more tenacious influences of physical disability. Improvements in our system of education . . . may sooner or later counterbalance the effects of the apathy of the uncultivated and of the rudeness of the lower classes and raise them to a higher standard. But how shall we eradicate the stigma of a lower race when its blood has once been allowed to flow freely into that of our children.

17 Third, and of greatest significance, she expunges several long passages on interbreeding that place the entire correspondence in a different setting from the one she fashioned. In them, we grasp Louis's intense, visceral revulsion toward the idea of sexual contact between races. This deep and irrational fear was as strong a driving force within him as any abstract notion about separate creation: "The production of half-breeds," he writes, "is as much a sin against nature, as incest in a civilized community is a sin against purity of character. . . . I hold it to be a perversion of every natural sentiment."

18 This natural aversion is so strong that abolitionist sentiment cannot reflect any innate sympathy for blacks but must arise because many "blacks" have substantial amounts of white blood and whites instinctively sense this part of themselves: "I have no doubt in my mind that the sense of abhorrence against slavery, which has led to the agitation now culminating in our civil war, has been chiefly if unconsciously fostered by the recognition of our own type in the offspring of southern gentlemen, moving among us as negros *[sic]*, which they are not."

19 But if races naturally repel each other, how then do "southern gentlemen" take such willing advantage of their bonded women? Agassiz blames the mulatto house slaves. Their whiteness renders them attractive; their blackness, lascivious. The poor, innocent young men are enticed and entrapped.

> As soon as the sexual desires are awakening in the young men of the South, they find it easy to gratify themselves by the readiness with which they are met by colored [mulatto] house servants. [This contact] blunts his better instincts in that direction and leads him

> gradually to seek more spicy partners, as I have heard the full blacks called by fast young men. One thing is certain, that there is no elevating element whatever conceivable in the connection of individuals of different races; there is neither love, nor desire for improvement of any kind. It is altogether a physical connection.

How a previous generation of gentlemen overcame their aversion to produce the first mulattoes, we are not told.

20 We cannot know in detail why Elizabeth chose her deletions. I doubt that a conscious desire to convert Louis's motives from prejudice to logical implication prompted all her actions. Simple Victorian prudery probably led her to reject a public airing of any statement about sex. In any case, her deletions did distort Louis Agassiz's thought and did render his intentions according to the fallacious and self-serving model favored by scientists—that opinions arise from dispassionate surveys of raw information.

21 These restorations show that Louis Agassiz was jolted to consider the polygenist theory of races as separate species by his initial, visceral reaction to contact with blacks. They also demonstrate that his extreme views on racial mixing were powered more by intense sexual revulsion than by any abstract theory of hybridity.

22 Racism has often been buttressed by scientists who present a public façade of objectivity to mask their guiding prejudices. Agassiz's case may be distant, but its message rings through our century as well.

QUESTIONS

Ideas

1. Stephen Jay Gould says that Victorian biographies often "masquerade as humbly objective accounts" (paragraph 1) and that scientists have and may continue to "present a public façade of objectivity to mask their guiding prejudices" (paragraph 23). Is it possible for a writer to be unbiased and free of political ideology, to be "a humble and disinterested scholar," as Agassiz claimed to be? Or is "objectivity" always a cover for hidden or unexamined ideas? How would you define "objective" writing? How does Gould's writing fit into this definition?
2. In paragraph 8, Gould says: "In logic, separate needn't mean unequal. . . . But . . . a group in power always conflates separation

with superiority." Discuss this idea in terms of groups who choose separatism to maintain group identity, even though they are not the group in power. Should differences be ignored, aiming for a "melting pot" ideal? Is it possible for a person to be "racist" (or "sexist") if he or she is not a member of the dominant group? How might the situation Gould describes be changed so that marginalized groups could keep valued differences, yet have an equal voice politically and socially?

3. Do you think that the educational policies suggested by Agassiz (paragraph 10) have been eliminated from schools? How might "tracking" or "ability grouping" and culturally biased testing continue to separate students according to race, even when official policies deny such separation occurs? Can you think of examples of Agassiz's logic that you have heard in recent years?

Organization

4. Gould has stated that his favorite method of writing is "beginning with something small and curious and then working outward and onward by a network of lateral connections." What "small and curious" discrepancies led Gould to write this essay? How does he use the repetition of words and ideas to achieve cohesiveness among seemingly unrelated bits of information? How do the concluding paragraphs work to tie the essay together? Does the essay have a thesis statement, i.e., one sentence that summarizes one main idea? What would you say is the main idea of this essay?
5. In his characterization of Agassiz in paragraph 2, Gould includes the phrase "not overly faithful." What reasons could Gould have for including this comment? Does it relate to later content about sexuality? Is it irrelevant? What is its effect at this point in the essay?

Sentences

6. Paragraph 20 begins with a question. What effect does this usage have on your reading of Agassiz's opinions which directly follow? What function does the final sentence of the paragraph seem to play? Find other instances of Gould's use of questions or implied questions. What is their rhetorical effect?
7. Gould's essay contains a great many quotations and paraphrases of Louis Agassiz's ideas. Note several ways in which Gould structures sentences which contain or introduce quotations and/or paraphrases. Can you pinpoint any factors that may come into play when Gould chooses how to cite Agassiz's opinions?