

PINK LILY POND, AGASSIZ'S FACTS, DARWIN'S FANTASIES

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In his autobiographical THE MAGIC LANTERN, Ingmar Bergman attributes at least some of his creativity to having had, in childhood, extreme difficulty distinguishing fact from fantasy. As I write, the American public is having extreme difficulty separating, in the Presidential campaigns, facts from managed, spin-controlled, handled, tailored, madavenued fantasies fed at us in sound bites and photo-ops. This Thinksheet is a parable, a true story, a cautionary tale, for church (especially seminaries) and society (especially the public schools & their educationistic establishment).

1. As I write this in my study, I can look through library and greenhouse out toward Pink (now called "Red") Lily Pond, not much more than a hundred yards away, where the world-class Harvard biologist, Louis Agassiz (who died 115 years ago) discovered, & later established the taxonomy of, the pink (water) lily. Do drop in & visit us, but don't look for that lily: too late to save the lily, we're fighting now to save the pond from eutrophy....but that's another tale.

2. Coming from Switzerland (in 1846), he became a grand master of the English language, which he used with persuasive force as author and both academic & popular teacher. He founded, and was long curator of, the Agassiz Museum in Cambridge & the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole, the latter not all that far from Pink Lily Pond (and a scientific research center so important that 70 Nobel laureates in science have worked and lectured there). His byword: "Go to Nature; take the facts in your own hands; look, and see for yourself!"

3. One often hears/reads that LA was the most effective promoter of science education in American history (as Edison was the greatest promoter of creative tinkering, grassroots engineering). Though I'm the third generation from him, I can see and feel the glow of his cool ecstasy, his merger of passion & reason in facts-seeking: one of his students was science teacher of my father, who never tired of passing on to us children the words of & the stories about LA, one of the first-level secular saints of my childhood.

4. I've mentioned two institutions LA founded; his students, and those they influenced, founded many more in his spirit. One of these, New York Theological Seminary (founded 1900), from its earliest days told LA stories in connection with "inductive Bible study," which the school came into existence to practice & promote, over against a theological educational establishment that had wandered away from the canonical biblical text. See the application of LA's byword: "Go to the Bible; take the facts into your own head & heart; look, and see for yourself!" How thrilled I was, in a 1937 NYTS course I took, to find the same LA spirit that I knew from my father! Even some of the same stories, especially the one about the stinking fish (which rots all over simultaneously, not--pace Mike Dukakis--"from the head"), a story still in use, in printed form, in the seminary--the story of a fish LA had a student study all day day after day under the single directive, "Look!"

5. The LA spirit was & is unsympathetic both with (1) those who input in the interest of output (no, not computer programmers; eisegetes) and (2) those who, looking for what's not there, miss seeing what's there (yes, ideologs). Let's apply:

...to the Bible. It's a God-book, so a good place--the best literature, I believe--to look for God. "Scientific creationists" look for science, historians for history, theologians for theology ("biblical theology"), sociologists for sociology, psychologists for psychology.

...to nature, God's wordless book. Following his Grampa Erasmus, Chas. Darwin claimed to find evolution there, an excessive extrapolation LA scoffed at but "modern science" has bought (and postmodern science is questioning). On the other side of the Atlantic, CD was as dedicated a nature-observer as LA was on this side. But, said LA, CD was insufficiently respectful of the facts he found: "natural selection" was not a respectable scientific theory but an alien philosophical import. ...CD died nine years after LA.