

"Gazing on the face of death..." --

The *Memento Mori* of "September 11, 2001"

The man who coined the expression "American Dream", James Truslow Adams (*The Epic of America*, 1930), in an essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* on one of America's most influential and characteristic thinkers, Ralph Waldo Emerson, complained that even with all the character, inspiration and depth with which Emerson wrote, as an American philosopher, that Adams could find no satisfying, serious, adequate depth, engagement or guidance in "the Concord Sage" with evil, tragedy, suffering, death.

The expression "American Dream" - added to the "American Creed" of Jefferson ("life, liberty, and the pursuit of...") -- has been popular since it began in the 1930's. And in however many ways it has been understood and interpreted over the past seven decades -- it still is one central idea by which Americans try to articulate and understand themselves, and to live. J. T. Adams was not satisfied with Emerson's philosophy, and in that essay, he wrote comments on America which -- for all that they may not have applied at that time to Europe before, during and after the Nazis came to power, or World War II, or to Russia, Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, etc later -- could be argued to have applied to the USA, the American people and culture, from then till...September 11, 2001?

...We have never suffered like the rest of humanity, and have waxed fat without, as yet, having to consider the problems forced upon others, until we have ceased to believe in their reality. The dominant American note has been one of a buoyant and unthinking optimism. American is a child who has never gazed on the face of death.

...Are our letters and philosophy to remain the child until the Gorgon faces of evil, disaster, and death freeze our unlined ones into eternal stone? ("Emerson Re-Read", *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1930)

This quote by James Truslow Adams is deep and serious, and certainly still calls up reflection on American society and culture today. It is kin in a way to the ideas expressed by John Adams (no relation; second US President) to Thomas Jefferson, in a letter from Quincy of May 6, 1816:

"...In your favour [Jefferson's letter] of April 8th, you 'Wonder for what good End the Sensations of Grief could be intended...

"...Why might We not have the fragrance and Beauty of the Rose without the Thorns?...

"...Did you ever see a Portrait or a Statue of a great Man, without perceiving strong Traits of Pain and Anxiety? These furrows were all ploughed in the Countenance, by Grief. Our juvenale Oracle, Sir Edward Coke, thought that none were fit for Legislators and Magistrates, but 'Sad Men.' And Who were these sad Men? They were aged men, who had been tossed and buffeted in the Vicissitudes of Life, forced upon profound Reflection by Grief and disappointments and taught to command their Passions and Prejudices. ... Grief drives Men into habits of serious Reflection, sharpens the understanding and softens the heart; it compels them to arouse their Reason, to assert its Empire over their Passions, Propensities and Prejudices; to elevate them to Superiority over all human Events; to give them the *Felices Animi immotan tranquillitatem* ["the imperturbable tranquility of a happy heart"]; in short, to make them Stoics and Christians.

"After all, as Grief is Pain, it stands in the Predicament of all other Evil and the great question Occurs[:] what is the Origin and what is the final cause of Evil. This perhaps is known only to Omniscience. We poor Mortals have nothing to do with it, but to fabricate all the good We can out of all inevitable Evils, and to avoid all that are avoidable, and many such there are, among which are our own unnecessary Apprehension and imaginary Fears."

The shock, surprise and incomprehension with which America experienced the deliberate, second attack on the World Trade Center in New York and the attack on the US Pentagon, shows its age-old, ahistoric mentality -- already in the 1830's de Tocqueville had noted it in his Democracy in America; in other words, its late naivete. It is indeed late in time and history for a culture and mentality to be so "naive and innocent", especially for the world's now sole superpower. Militarily and economically superior indeed; but a "superpower" in knowledge and wisdom from history, man, and life?

As the USA fits in a long line of imperial civilizations, *translatio imperii* (Ancient India, Persia, Egypt, Greece, Rome,...); it is unfortunate that -- in this

author's view -- this is not followed closely by a *translatio sapientia*, a passing on of wisdom from the earliest to the latest dominant culture and civilization...

Americans are commonly characterized as a young, present- and future-oriented people. As a Russian, discussing the clash and contrasts of civilizations, told me: 'American civilization and culture is at the age of a teenager, strong but immature'.

In my view not the many popular ideas and ideals associated with the "American Dream", nor Emerson's ideas, nor for that matter the well-known ideals in the "American Creed", articulated by Jefferson in the *Declaration of Independence*, are adequate, deep or appropriate enough to comprehend, and withstand, events like "September 11, 2001" in the USA. 'Gazing on a skull', *memento mori*, was not present in the ideas of 1776, nor in 19th century Concord; nor is such much part of the "American Dream". But the world, life, mankind, and history...are bigger and deeper than all of these times and ideas. History, the story of Mankind does demand such meditation for its comprehension, and endurance.

Such events are a novel shock to 'young' America; but not to history, nor other cultures and peoples even in our time. If America were not "a child who has never gazed on the face of death", it would not have been so surprised and shocked. Can America -- to consider J.T. Adams -- have a *thinking* optimism, and also remember *memento mori*? Certainly the live, televised destruction of the World Trade Towers is a *_gazing on the face of death*".

And however terrible the events of "September 11, 2001" -- after a terrible 20th century -- America will not have learned its lessons from history from such an attack on the USA, until it learns deeply and well, why this attack occurred. (And to recognize how the USA's 20th century imperial history is not unambiguously clean in this regard.)

"Know thine enemies" will not prevent, nor often appease them; but it is a much more mature stance than the leadership in popular American politics shows today.

Where are America's "Sad Men"? And can Americans, if only amongst some guiding "intelligentsia", conceive wisely for its people -- who will necessarily seek in their various religious "faiths" , their philosophies, their often simplistic, ahistorical ideas of good vs. evil in an "understanding" of "September 11, 2001" -- a combination and insight, a stance to life, that combines the "American Dream", the "American Creed" and *memento mori*?

Can America become a "mature adult", that can "gaze on the face of death"? For many reasons -- human, social and mental inertia among them -- I don't believe so.

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September 4, 2002; Moscow