



Ralph Waldo Emerson  
(1803-1882)

# The Tragic

from Uncollected Prose, Dial Essays 1844

---

He has seen but half the universe who never has been shown the House of Pain. As the salt sea covers more than two thirds of the surface of the globe, so sorrow encroaches in man on felicity. The conversation of men is a mixture of regrets and apprehensions. I do not know but the prevalent hue of things to the eye of leisure is melancholy. In the dark hours, our existence seems to be a defensive war, a struggle against the encroaching All, which threatens surely to engulf us soon, and is impatient of our short reprieve. How slender the possession that yet remains to us; how faint the animation! how the spirit seems already to contract its domain, retiring within narrower walls by the loss of memory, leaving its planted fields to erasure and annihilation. Already our own thoughts and words have an alien sound. There is a simultaneous diminution of memory and hope. Projects that once we laughed and leaped to execute, find us, now sleepy and preparing to lie down in the snow. And in the serene hours we have no courage to spare. We cannot afford to let go any advantages. The riches of body or of mind which we do not need today, are the reserved fund against the calamity that may arrive tomorrow. It is usually agreed that some nations have a more sombre temperament, and one would say that history gave no record of any society in which despondency came so readily to heart as we see it and feel it in ours. Melancholy

cleaves to the English mind in both hemispheres as closely as to the strings of an Æolian harp. Men and women at thirty years, and even earlier, have lost all spring and vivacity, and if they fail in their first enterprizes, they throw up the game. But whether we, and those who are next to us, are more or less vulnerable, no theory of life can have any right, which leaves out of account the values of vice, pain, disease, poverty, insecurity, disunion, fear, and death.

What are the conspicuous tragic elements in human nature?

The bitterest tragic element in life to be derived from an intellectual source is the belief in a brute Fate or Destiny; the belief that the order of nature and events is controlled by a law not adapted to man, nor man to that, but which holds on its way to the end, serving him if his wishes chance to lie in the same course, – crushing him if his wishes lie contrary to it, – and heedless whether it serves or crushes him. This is the terrible idea that lies at the foundation of the old Greek tragedy, and makes the Iphigeneia and Antigone and Orestes objects of such hopeless commiseration. They must perish, and there is no over-god to stop or to mollify this hideous enginery that grinds and thunders, and takes them up into its terrific system. The same idea makes the paralyzing terror with which the East Indian mythology haunts the imagination. The same thought is the predestination of the Turk. And universally in uneducated and unreflecting persons, on whom too the religious sentiment exerts little force, we discover traits of the same superstition; 'if you baulk water, you will be drowned the next time;' 'if you count ten stars, you will fall down dead;' 'if you spill the salt;' 'if your fork sticks upright in the floor;' 'if you say the Lord's prayer backwards;' – and so on, a several penalty, nowise grounded in the nature of the thing, but on an arbitrary will. But this terror of contravening an unascertained and unascertainable will, cannot coexist with reflection: it disappears with civilization, and can no more be reproduced than the fear of ghosts after childhood. It is discriminated from the doctrine of Philosophical Necessity herein: that the last is an Optimism, and therefore the suffering individual finds his good consulted in the good of all, of which he is a part. But in Destiny, it is not the good of the

whole or the best will that is enacted, but only one particular will. Destiny properly is not a will at all, but an immense whim; and this is the only ground of terror and despair in the rational mind, and of tragedy in literature. Hence the antique tragedy, which was founded on this faith, can never be reproduced.

But after the reason and faith have introduced a better public and private tradition, the tragic element is somewhat circumscribed. There must always remain, however, the hindrance of our private satisfaction by the laws of the world. The law which establishes nature and the human race, continually thwarts the will of ignorant individuals, and this in the particulars of disease, want, insecurity, and disunion.

But the essence of tragedy does not seem to me to lie in any list of particular evils. After we have enumerated famine, fever, inaptitude, mutilation, rack, madness, and loss of friends, we have not yet included the proper tragic element, which is Terror, and which does not respect definite evils but indefinite; an ominous spirit which haunts the afternoon and the night, idleness and solitude. A low haggard sprite sits by our side "casting the fashion of uncertain evils," – a sinister presentiment, a power of the imagination to dislocate things orderly and cheerful, and show them in startling disarray. Hark! what sounds on the night wind, the cry of Murder in that friendly house: see these marks of stamping feet, of hidden riot. The whisper overheard, the detected glance, the glare of malignity, ungrounded fears, suspicions, half-knowledge, and mistakes darken the brow and chill the heart of men. And accordingly it is natures not clear, not of quick and steady perceptions, but imperfect characters from which somewhat is hidden that all others see, who suffer most from these causes. In those persons who move the profoundest pity, tragedy seems to consist in temperament, not in events. There are people who have an appetite for grief, pleasure is not strong enough and they crave pain, mithridatic stomachs which must be fed on poisoned bread, natures so doomed that no prosperity can soothe their ragged and dishevelled desolation. They mis-hear and

mis-behold, they suspect and dread. They handle every nettle and ivy in the hedge, and tread on every snake in the meadow.

"Come bad chance,  
And we add to it our strength,  
And we teach it art and length,  
Itself o'er us to advance."

Frankly then it is necessary to say that all sorrow dwells in a low region. It is superficial; for the most part fantastic, or in the appearance and not in things. Tragedy is in the eye of the observer, and not in the heart of the sufferer. It looks like an insupportable load under which earth moans aloud, but analyze it; it is not I, it is not you, it is always another person who is tormented. If a man says, lo I suffer, – it is apparent that he suffers not, for grief is dumb. It is so distributed as not to destroy. That which would rend you, falls on tougher textures. That which seems intolerable reproach or bereavement, does not take from the accused or bereaved man or woman appetite or sleep. Some men are above grief, and some below it. Few are capable of love. In phlegmatic natures calamity is unaffecting, in shallow natures it is rhetorical. Tragedy must be somewhat which I can respect. A querulous habit is not tragedy. A panic such as frequently in ancient or savage nations put a troop or an army to flight without an enemy; a fear of ghosts; a terror of freezing to death that seizes a man in a winter midnight on the moors; a fright at uncertain sounds heard by a family at night in the cellar or on the stairs; are terrors that make the knees knock and the teeth chatter, but are no tragedy, any more than sea-sickness, which may also destroy life. It is full of illusion. As it comes, it has its support. The most exposed classes, soldiers, sailors, paupers, are nowise

destitute of animal spirits. The spirit is true to itself, and finds its own support in any condition, learns to live in what is called calamity, as easily as in what is called felicity, as the frailest glass-bell will support a weight of a thousand pounds of water at the bottom of a river or sea, if filled with the same.

A man should not commit his tranquillity to things, but should keep as much as possible the reins in his own hands, rarely giving way to extreme emotion of joy or grief. It is observed that the earliest works of the art of sculpture are countenances of sublime tranquillity. The Egyptian sphinxes, which sit today as they sat when the Greek came and saw them and departed, and when the Roman came and saw them and departed, and as they will still sit when the Turk, the Frenchman, and the Englishman, who visit them now, shall have passed by, "with their stony eyes fixed on the East and on the Nile," have countenances expressive of complacency and repose, an expression of health, deserving their longevity, and verifying the primeval sentence of history on the permanency of that people; "Their strength is to sit still." To this architectural stability of the human form, the Greek genius added an ideal beauty, without disturbing the seals of serenity; permitting no violence of mirth, or wrath, or suffering. This was true to human nature. For, in life, actions are few, opinions even few, prayers few; loves, hatreds, or any emissions of the soul. All that life demands of us through the greater part of the day, is an equilibrium, a readiness, open eyes and ears, and free hands. Society asks this, and truth, and love, and the genius of our life. There is a fire in some men which demands an outlet in some rude action; they betray their impatience of quiet by an irregular Catalinarian gait; by irregular, faltering, disturbed speech, too emphatic for the occasion. They treat trifles with a tragic air. This is not beautiful. Could they not lay a rod or two of stone wall, and work off this superabundant irritability. When two strangers meet in the highway, what each demands of the other is, that the aspect should show a firm mind, ready for any event of good or ill, prepared alike to give death or to give life, as the emergency of the next moment may require. We must walk as guests in nature, – not impassioned, but cool and disengaged. A man should try time, and his face should wear the

expression of a just judge, who has nowise made up his opinion, who fears nothing and even hopes nothing, but who puts nature and fortune on their merits: he will hear the case out, and then decide. For all melancholy, as all passion, belongs to the exterior life. Whilst a man is not grounded in the divine life by his proper roots, he clings by some tendrils of affection to society, – mayhap to what is best and greatest in it, and in calm times it will not appear that he is adrift and not moored; but let any shock take place in society, any revolution of custom, of law, of opinion, and at once his type of permanence is shaken. The disorder of his neighbors appears to him universal disorder; chaos is come again. But in truth he was already a driving wreck, before the wind arose which only revealed to him his vagabond state. If a man is centred, men and events appear to him a fair image or reflection of that which he knoweth beforehand in himself. If any perversity or profligacy break out in society, he will join with others to avert the mischief, but it will not arouse resentment or fear, because he discerns its impassable limits. He sees already in the ebullition of sin, the simultaneous redress.

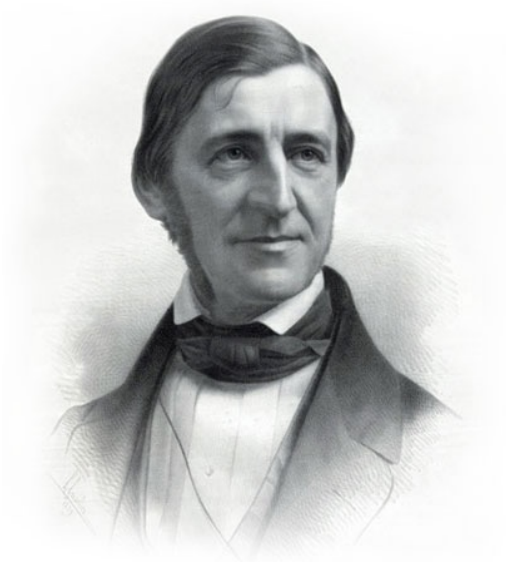
Particular reliefs, also, fit themselves to human calamities, for the world will be in equilibrium, and hates all manner of exaggeration. Time, the consoler, time, the rich carrier of all changes, dries the freshest tears by obtruding new figures, new costumes, new roads, on our eye, new voices on our ear. As the west wind lifts up again the heads of the wheat which were bent down and lodged in the storm, and combs out the matted and dishevelled grass as it lay in night-locks on the ground, so we let in time as a drying wind into the seed-field of thoughts which are dank and wet, and low-bent. Time restores to them temper and elasticity. How fast we forget the blow that threatened to cripple us. Nature will not sit still; the faculties will do somewhat; new hopes spring, new affections twine, and the broken is whole again.

Time consoles, but Temperament resists the impression of pain. Nature proportions her defence to the assault. Our human being is wonderfully plastic, if it cannot win this

satisfaction here, it makes itself amends by running out there and winning that. It is like a stream of water, which, if dammed up on one bank, over-runs the other, and flows equally at its own convenience over sand, or mud, or marble. Most suffering is only apparent. We fancy it is torture: the patient has his own compensations. A tender American girl doubts of Divine Providence whilst she reads the horrors of "the middle passage:" and they are bad enough at the mildest; but to such as she these crucifixions do not come: they come to the obtuse and barbarous, to whom they are not horrid, but only a little worse than the old sufferings. They exchange a cannibal war for the stench of the hold. They have gratifications which would be none to the civilized girl. The market-man never damned the lady because she had not paid her bill, but the stout Irish woman has to take that once a month. She, however, never feels weakness in her back because of the slave-trade. This self-adapting strength is especially seen in disease. "It is my duty," says Sir Charles Bell, "to visit certain wards of the hospital where there is no patient admitted but with that complaint which most fills the imagination with the idea of insupportable pain and certain death. Yet these wards are not the least remarkable for the composure and cheerfulness of their inmates. The individual who suffers has a mysterious counterbalance to that condition, which, to us who look upon her, appears to be attended with no alleviating circumstance." Analogous supplies are made to those individuals whose character leads them to vast exertions of body and mind. Napoleon said to one of his friends at St. Helena, "Nature seems to have calculated that I should have great reverses to endure, for she has given me a temperament like a block of marble. Thunder cannot move it; the shaft merely glides along. The great events of my life have slipped over me without making any impression on my moral or physical nature."

The intellect is a consoler, which delights in detaching, or putting an interval between a man and his fortune, and so converts the sufferer into a spectator, and his pain into poetry. It yields the joys of conversation, of letters, and of science. Hence also the torments of life become tuneful tragedy, solemn and soft with music, and garnished with rich dark pictures. But higher still than the activities of art, the intellect in its purity, and the moral sense in its

purity, are not distinguished from each other, and both ravish us into a region whereinto these passionate clouds of sorrow cannot rise.



Ralph Waldo Emerson  
(1803-1882)