

War's Dialectical Tragedy:

Irony, Suffering, and the Limits of Human Understanding

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Tragic irony may mean the dramatic irony in scripted tragedy (tragic play). The audience can predict the regrettable outcome on the stage before the main characters do. I focus on non-scripted events and their tragic aspects. Colloquially, disaster and tragedy are synonyms, but this is misleading. Tragedy means a disaster in special circumstances, which I suggest we can read ironically. This is to say, as I argue, tragedy is necessarily ironic. I read Richard Rorty on irony and Hegel on tragic irony and cunning of reason. My aim is to redescribe real-life conflicts by using the dialectical understanding of irony and tragedy. Following Rorty and Hegel, I apply their theories of identity to real tragedies. The validation of the theory of literary criticism is a practical matter. My key illustrations come from modern wars; wars are and cause disasters, and thus I expect we can discover cases of tragic irony in factual and counterfactual contexts. Sometimes, the losses and suffering would have been meaningless regardless of the war's outcome. The winner suffers, but it would have been better not to win. The losers suffer, but it would not have been better had they won. A total defeat would have been better than a conditional one. These redescrptions show the ironic differences between disaster and tragedy in non-scripted contexts—and all these cases are controversial.

Keywords: Irony; Situational Irony; Dramatic Irony; Disaster; Hegel; Rorty; Cunning Of Reason; Redescription; Literary Criticism; Counterfactual History; Essential Contestability

1. The Idea of Tragedy and Its Ironies

1.1. Tragedies

“War is both father and king of all; some she has shown forth as gods and others as men, some he has made slaves and others free.” (Wheelwright 1999, p. 29,

Heraclitus fragment 25)

“The stupidity which characterizes history’s peaks has no equivalent but the ineptitude of those who are its agents.” (Cioran 2010, p. 94; also Leskanich 2021)

Tragedy figures in two different contexts, non-scripted and scripted: (A) what is tragic in real life, and (B) tragedy in theatrical plays. In (A), tragedies are disasters, and these words are often treated as synonyms. In (B), the context is scripted and designed following certain well-established rules. One may adopt (A) and write it to (B). Or one may dismiss (A) and adopt (B) with a caveat: the main character in the play is a brave hero who confronts the gods and exceeds his preset human limits. Euripides’ play *The Bacchae* and Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and *Ajax* are good examples. Aristotle’s *Poetics* discusses (B), but in this essay, we are not directly interested in scripted contexts.

The aim of tragedy, Aristotle writes, is to bring about a “catharsis” of the spectators— to arouse in them sensations of pity and fear, and to purge them of these emotions so that they leave the theater feeling cleansed and uplifted, with a heightened understanding of the ways of gods and men (see *CliffsNotes* 2023).

In most cases, real-life tragedies do not display *peripeteia* and allow catharsis of any kind, except if the audience is willing and able to read them as they read scripted plays— this happens. Such an aesthetic attitude may entail cruelty. Emperor Nero played his harp and enjoyed the view of the burning city of Rome. Another problem with (B) is that it is unconnected to art’s modern and postmodern languages—it belongs mainly to art history.

We will see that tragedy is always ironic, but what do we mean by irony, and more specifically, situational irony? Irony is famously difficult to define, for instance, look at the following explication of situational irony: “It seems fairly clear that most forms of irony involved . . . a discrepancy or incongruity . . . between actions and their results, or between appearance and reality. In all cases there may be an element of absurd or paradoxical.” (Cuddon 1999, p. 430). In this definition, the expressions “it seems fairly clear” (double hesitation) and “maybe” (suggestion) exemplify unintended ironies. A possible strategy is to leave such notions as irony intuitive. However, to be clear, in this article, I use the term situational irony as follows: My minimal notion is, wantonly advertising contextual discrepancies, or more explicitly, a view of the world that wantonly emphasizes the dialectical ambiguity of possible situational descriptions as discrepancies that conflict so that what is bad may look good and what is good bad (sarcasm), thus pointing out our alleged evaluative vulnerabilities. Here good and bad are generic evaluative terms. Irony is always critical and evaluative and reveals an underdog’s position.² However, all these

definitions are essentially contestable. (Väyrynen 2014).

The two key theorists in this article are Richard Rorty and Hegel. I will discuss Hegel in due course but first, we must focus on Rorty. As I said, irony is a tricky concept to define, but luckily, we need only one specific notion. Rorty offers a fresh, Hegelian point of view: irony means the choice of new vocabularies and the way of redescribing events in novel terms by us “ironists.”³ Next, he also introduces the idea of dialectics in the context of irony:

The ironist’s preferred form of argument is dialectical in the sense that she takes the unit of persuasion to be a vocabulary rather than a proposition. Her method is redescription rather than inference. I have defined (dialectic) as they attempt to play off vocabularies against one another. Literary criticism does for ironists what the search for universal moral principles is supposed to do for metaphysicians.

Irony is dialectical to the core. Next, writers practice literary criticism when they dialectically oppose the established vocabulary by replacing it with a new one.⁴ His choice of words is revealing: they “play off vocabularies against one another.” However, the idea of redescription that he recommends may be misleading because it is not dialectical in nature; we need the antagonistic touch of “against.” Irony is critical (note 2).

What about the idea of literary criticism? Literature covers “whatever the literary critics criticize.” (Rorty 1989, p. 81). The next part of this article on military history can be classified as dialectical literary criticism focusing on historical texts and redescribing them, say, in counterfactual terms. I play what is speculatively possible against the accepted facts and the Truth. From the Rortyan—and Hegelian—perspectives, dialectical irony is not only theory but practice, and I follow this norm. Literary criticism and irony are empty words before they are realized in practice. Rorty’s own text illustrates this principle. His theory is rather thin and obscure, but it works well in its practical context.

1.2. The Idea of Tragic Irony

Next, tragic irony, which is a version of dramatic irony: the audience knows what will happen better than the characters on stage. (Airaksinen 2023). If the events are tragic, this is called tragic irony.⁵ These definitions concern (B) and the scripted version of tragedy. Peter Goldie offers a good example of scripted dramatic irony. This is obviously an example of scripted tragic irony, too.

In Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, there is a scene that involves a very powerful use of dramatic irony. Gloucester, who has recently been cruelly blinded, wants to die. He asks Edgar to take him to the “very brim” of the cliffs of Dover, to “a cliff whose high and pending head. / Looks fearfully in the confined deep” (Act IV Scene i). Edgar misleads him into thinking that he has done just that. [] The

audience knows that what Gloucester does not know: that, contrary to what he thinks, he is not on the edge of the cliffs of Dover, and thus not able with one step to cast himself over the edge to his certain death. (Goldie 2014, p. 27; also, Goldie 2007)

We have already rejected (B). Let us now reread (A) and save the idea of non-scripted tragedy from triviality. Non-scripted tragic irony means the perceived ironies of a human disaster, for instance, war. Many specific definitions of and approaches to tragedy exist, but in this article, we use only one that is oriented toward Hegel. My main point is, a tragedy is a disaster in an abnormal context—which, as I will argue, ironizes it (situational irony). I will build my subsequent argument on this very idea. We may explore bizarre causes or conclude that the suffering was needless, meaningless, and excessive. This makes a disaster situationally ironic. Such ironizing factors may be debatable, but they still distinguish between the vulgar idea of tragedy as a disaster and its ironized, dialectical reinterpretation.

Illustrations: When I say disaster, say a murder, entails an ironic component, I mean I can ironize it if I want, something we normally may not do. Murder is not only an immoral act (by definition) but also an abnormal way of dying. That is why it is open to ironizing by an ironist who wants to make a point. Ironic reinterpretation is a matter of the relevant attitude that refuses to take things as they are usually taken. An ironist shuns stereotypes and focuses on what is not normally seen or accepted. I assume the role of an ironist when I refuse the legal vocabulary of murder and switch for instance to affective parlance and its metaphors, and say, she butchered the pig.⁶

When discussing tragedies, we may focus on something other than their ironies. We may want to avoid the ironic context, although it is still there; it feels too cruel to ironize a terrible event. But we need to distinguish between tragedy and disaster. We can draw a clear line between vulgar and ironic notions of tragedy. I only write “tragedy” in what follows when I mean an ironized version of a disaster. In other cases, I write “disaster.”

1.3. Hegel on Irony and the Cunning of Reason

Examples: The Lisbon earthquake in 1775 was a major disaster and tragedy. But it was a tragedy only in the Leibnizian best possible world, created and controlled by a benevolent and omnipotent Christian God. Why would good God allow it to happen? “Lisbon had seemed eternal,” even Ulysses visited there, and now it was ruined by an earthquake. This is situationally ironic; thus, the city’s fate, the disaster, was tragic. (Friedrich 1982,

p. 179). The Chernobyl tragedy (1986) resulted from a mismanaged safety check. The Holocaust was a tragedy of otherworldly cruelty against innocent people committed on the industrial scale by a leading, cultured

nation—bitter irony. History is full of tragedies due to capricious events and human irrationality. Sometimes sarcasm works as well as irony:⁷ Sean McMeekin (2021) argues that World War Two was fought to make the world “safe for communism.” For an anti-communist, the irony makes it tragic.

The Foundational Rule is as follows:

(FR) Call it a disaster tragedy, and you are talking about tragic irony—because tragedy is ironic per definitionem. (Because tragedy is a disaster plus irony.)

As I said above, the idea (B) of tragedy, that is, its scripted version, is not relevant to my argument; (FR) rejects (A) as a trivialization, why? I already offered some reasons for accepting (FR): tragedies are not the same as disasters. When we further elaborate this intuition, we notice that disaster is an extensional notion that focuses on the large scale of destruction or its comprehensiveness. The city of Lisbon was comprehensively levelled in 1775. But tragedy is an intensional notion when the focus is on what is dramatic in a disaster—in this way, the shadow of (B) returns. A non-scripted tragedy also has its dramatic side, which I conceptualize as ironic (in the Rortyan and Hegelian sense). To call an event a tragedy is to assign a special meaning to a disaster.

My discussion below loosely follows the narrow, idealistic notion of Hegelian Tragic Irony: (HTI) A Historic subject fails disastrously, which leads to unforeseen greater things where a higher value is revealed.

For instance, think of Grigori Rasputin (1869–1816), whose popularity and miserable demise facilitated V. I. Lenin’s unforeseen success, revealed the higher values of socialism, and made Lenin a “world-historical individual.”⁹ (HTI) is a special case of a disaster as a tragedy. Next, when we narrate tragic events, we must pay close attention to their nexus or what exactly is ironic in these narratives.¹⁰ We find the nexus when we find the source of irony. In the Rasputin case, the nexus is his faithfulness to the Tsar that led to his murder and gave Lenin a chance. A narrative may have more than one nexus.

Hegel’s Cunning of (Historical) Reason entails irony.

(CHR) An agent promotes her goals and, therefore, contributes to realizing higher, ideal goals.

In other words, “It sets the passions work for itself . . . while [the agent] pays the penalty, and suffers the loss.” And the loss results from the “passions of individuals.” (Hegel [1840] 1956, p. 33). The structural similarity between (HTI) and (CHR) is obvious. Hegel continues his present argument by explaining the dialectics of personal and ideal aims in (CHR):

Human beings least of all, sustain the bare external relation of mere means to the great ideal aim. Not only do they, in the very act of realizing it, make it the occasion of satisfying personal desires, whose purport is diverse

from that aim— but they share in that ideal aim itself; and are, for that very reason, objects of their existence; not formally merely, as the world of living beings generally is—whose individual life is essentially subordinate to that of man, and is properly used up as an instrument. Men, on the contrary, are objects of existence to themselves, as regards the intrinsic import of the aim in question. (see also Forbes 1975, esp. pp. xv, xxviii)

Agents act, but whether they win or lose, their fate serves the ideal goal (Zweck) of world history; how this happens will remain unknown till the end, if the end (Ende) ever comes. Agents pursue their subjective aims, yet they serve the universal goal, or the “great, ideal aim,” which is the full realization, or freedom, of the Objective Spirit.¹¹ We may believe we struggle to promote our own goals when history cunningly realizes, through us, the ideal aim—Hegel’s idea of history is teleological, see Tucker (2009). Nothing in the present paper suggests this is true. However, the cunning of reason makes all political history ironic without exception. No ultimate goal and aim may exist, but history realizes many goals in unexpected ways, as I try to show in the second part of this article. At the same time, what is realized may stay controversial, as I will show in the third part. In history, what happens is never quite what was intended. This is to say we always have two different descriptions of what happened and why, and this entails irony—as a literary criticism makes clear. Therefore, when we focus on (C), the cunning of reason makes dramatic irony in history impossible: no audience is ever in the position to see how particular events will unfold in the future—their true meaning—and what the world-historical heroes’ fates signify (cf. HTI).

For a Hegelian, history may be tragic, but it cannot be tragically ironic in the dramatic sense (B). However, for Hegel, historical events have their ironic reading; therefore, historical disasters must have their ironic nexus. All historical events and, a fortiori, disasters are ironic. But his is far too general: all human-caused disasters are tragic only because of Hegel’s cunning of history. In that case, Hegel’s idea of the “great, ideal aim,” the teleological ultimate goal of history, is a nexus—of course, others exist as well, see Tucker (2009). In non-teleological thinking, we must make the idea of nexus more specific. At the same time, we must admit that realizing personal goals tends to bring unpredictable consequences. In other words, our proximal view of events differs from the distal view, which makes the context *prima facie* ironic.

In sum: We have distinguished two ironic ways of events, single and double nexus cases. Rasputin’s murder is a tragedy and therefore ironic; moreover, this tragedy appears ironic when we mention Lenin’s revolutionary success. We say Rasputin was murdered, and this was tragic because murder as an unnatural cause of death entails irony (first nexus), but the case of Rasputin is ironic, in toto, because his death contributed to Lenin’s revolutionary success

and the rise of communism and liberation of Russian workers (second nexus). A critical reader notices a third nexus because using Rasputin as an example of (HTI) and (CHR) looks ironic or perhaps cynical. However, this third nexus is not relevant to my argument. We also have cases with a single nexus. We find a single nexus as follows. The Chernobyl disaster is tragic because a safety check caused it. To ensure its security, they destroyed the power station (nexus). But we can transform this case into a somewhat artificial double nexus case à la (HTI): The trusted operators' incompetence (first nexus) leads to a higher level of public awareness of nuclear safety (second nexus). The conclusion is that we have single and double nexus cases of tragic irony.

2. Tragic Ironies of War

The purpose of this part is to clarify and practice what Rorty means by his literary criticism in the Hegelian spirit. I will show how the vocabularies of the possible (contrary- to-fact) shake the foundation of the fact-based Truth, showing the true complexity of non-scripted tragedies. All of this is teleological. Zweck is, as I see it, the liberation of thought in the sense that we are free to see controversies in a new light that opens up ever more possibilities for critical reading of historical texts. We will also see how complicated such dialectics can be. I do not offer any systematic reading of recent military history; on the contrary, I offer a series of redescriptions that illuminate disasters that are also tragedies. There is not much room for optimistic sentimentalism or patriotism here when we discuss something as controversial as wars. Their results are often too paradoxical. The last part offers some philosophical ideas of controversy and debate, essential as these are to dialectical literary criticism.

History is full of disasters and tragedies, of which wars are paradigmatic examples. Suppose two warring states fight to the bitter end; White wins and Red loses. White may or may not benefit from their victory (Pyrrhic victory), yet they cannot avoid suffering. Red may suffer more as a loser, but the degree varies from a narrow escape to a catastrophe. Suppose Red started the lost war. Their defeat may contain an ironic nexus and, hence, be tragic: a pompous start and a miserable ending do not fit; think of Operation Barbarossa in 1941. Think of two images: first, when the Wehrmacht so gloriously went against the Soviet Union, and second, when their decimated remnants returned to defend Berlin. Too often, generals are certain of their quick and glorious successes, looking forward to victory parades.

If White did not start the war, their disastrous losses and subsequent defeat might have no ironic nexus. They are victims, and thus it is regrettable that they lost the war, but it is not a tragedy. However, we may consider counterfactual cases where White won and Red lost.¹² The following two

counterfactual conditionals that hark back to (C) come across as intuitive cases of tragic irony:

Proposition one: If White had lost the war, they would have suffered less than they did as winners.

Proposition two: Even if Red had won the war they started, they would not have benefited from it.

Both propositions one and two show ironic potential. The nexus in proposition one is that losing, which is stereotypically a dreadful and even tragic fate, is now good—or losing may look preferable to winning, which does not respect the logic of struggle. Of course, White's suffering, when minimized by defeat, would not have been tragic nor tragically ironic. Still, their suffering as winners is tragically ironic because it would have been minimized by losing the war.

Proposition two is tragically ironic in an interesting sense, which may not have attracted sufficient attention from the ironists and the students of ironic tropes. We can find its nexus by expanding its abstract frame and telling a real-life story. We need an example where Red started a war, suffered greatly, and lost. This is a disaster, perhaps a tragedy, if losing a war one started is, as such, ironic. But suppose victory would have been meaningless, and then the case has a new nexus, which indeed is tragic. This exemplifies tragic irony when the nexus is the meaninglessness of their war effort. The loss was painful, but victory would have been meaningless. If losing a war one started is a tragedy, we have a two-nexus case.

Suppose the following is true:

Proposition three: Even if Red had won the war, which they started believing they could not win, they would not have benefited.

Red started and lost a war they believed they could not win. This implies a nexus, and hence, the case exemplifies situational irony. In fact, proposition three has two nexuses. The first is not counterfactual, focusing on the war's desperate motives. The second is a counterfactual one like that in proposition two. A historical example is Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. They went to war believing they could not win, except by good luck, and their surprise attack made all future compromises with the US government impossible.¹³ They started a war they could not win nor diplomatically negotiate in any way. Why they did it may be understandable, though: their successful wars in Asia had benefited them so much that the nation considered it irreversible, and now the USA insisted on that. Under this interpretation, the narrative loses its first nexus: the USA forced Japan to attack. Suppose one comments by saying they were trapped, and then they trapped themselves. The nexus returns.

Suppose Japan won the war. What were the benefits? We must develop this narratively. Japanese militarism and its misguided and cruel imperialist

policies would have continued. The wars would have continued in China, and the political repression at home would have intensified. Nothing good would have resulted from their victory in World War Two. In any case, the counterfactual analysis reveals several nexuses that make the tragedy of that war overdetermined.

Next, we discuss the three wars of Finland.¹⁴ The Finns did not accept the Soviet Union's territorial demands in 1939, despite promised compensation, risking a war they believed they could not win. The country was unprepared for war, partly because of the utopian pacifism of the Social Democratic party. The Finns fought well in the ensuing Winter War (1939–1940), but the peace conditions included the same original territorial demands, except Finland did not receive the compensation. This case has two nexuses: go to war when you believe you cannot win, and the original treaty returns. The Winter War was tragic in two ways: it had a tragic start and result. The compensatory areas would have been worthless to the Finns; they were mainly bogs and desolate forests deep in northern Karelia.

Finland joined Operation Barbarossa in 1941 and attacked the Soviet Union in Karelia, achieving remarkable successes. Still, the Soviet army threw them back in the summer of 1944, and Finland was closely saved from the jaws of defeat when hostilities ended later that year. What would have happened had Hitler's Third Reich won the war? Finland would have expanded in the east as Germany's vassal state, sharing their immense future foreign policy problems in the East, internal repression, and mass murders. It was better for the Finns that the Germans lost the war, and the Finnish ambitions were thwarted. This is an example of tragic irony in counterfactual history. A German victory would not have brought anything good to the Finns; this is ironic, and thus their suffering was tragic. Had the Third Reich been successful against the Soviet Union, the Finnish state and society would have been worse off than it was after the German defeat.

The next two examples from the military history of Finland illustrate tragic irony. The counterfactual irony is obvious in the Finnish Civil War of 1918 when the revolutionary Reds (socialists and communists) tried to defeat the (bourgeois) Whites and create a workers' paradise in close contact with Lenin's new Soviet Union. The Reds lost the war, which they had considered justified and winnable. Their miscalculations were disastrous, yet we find no situational irony. But the case becomes tragically ironic when we realize that the Reds' victory would have been meaningless. Lenin would have taken Finland back, which meant the loss of independence. Financial and administrative chaos would have resulted. And the Stalinist terror would have decimated the Reds' ranks in Finland, just like it did in the Soviet Union, where many refugees Finnish Reds were killed in Stalin's Great Purge (1937–1938) and even earlier, see Barry (1999). The tragic nexus is the same as in

proposition two.

This last example is no longer controversial. From the present perspective, the Reds' victory would have been meaningless and even disastrous to the country and them. Of course, the case's evaluation stayed open during the turbulent 1930s, when its nexus was still controversial due to the leftist narrative tradition. Historical narratives have their history, and their evaluation changes accordingly. However, the Red Revolution in Finland is a good example of tragic irony. They fought a bitter losing war that would have been disastrous both ways—to win or lose meant nothing but suffering. The Reds started the war with random terror against the Whites, and the Whites got their revenge through mass executions and hunger-stricken concentration camps. White commanders targeted Red women soldiers without giving their leader General C. G. Mannerheim, a chance to intervene. The Whites' cruel and lawless revenge mentality brought immense suffering to the Reds. It was a disaster, but its nexus depends on the realization that a victory would not have been significantly better. Hence, the nexus depends on accepting certain counterfactual ideas, which again depend on value-laden historical speculation; that is, what could have happened and whether it would have been good or bad. A victory in war is not always beneficial to the winner. The Allies won the Great War against Germany in 1918, but their vengeful mismanagement of the peace conditions laid the foundations of Nazism and World War Two. All this is tragically ironic because of the monstrous evil that resulted from their sweet victory.

Sometimes a defeat is a blessing in disguise to the defeated state and nation. A total defeat may purify the nation and show them the right way. I do not mean a case like Poland in World War Two, but Germany and Japan.¹⁵ Their massive losses, destruction, and unconditional surrender created two democratic, peace-loving, rich nations when the winners continued their belligerent ways, creating havoc in developing countries without much good to themselves. Winning encourages militarism.¹⁶ Think of Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and now Ukraine. Recalling proposition one, we can confidently say that their total defeat in World War Two benefited Japan and Germany while the winners struggled. If the winners allow, a total defeat revives the losers—which is paradoxical and ironic.

Japan's history also shows why and how victory can be harmful. (Connaughton 2020). Japan's victory over Russia in 1905 meant disastrous consequences for Japan; especially bad was the Tsushima sea battle that annihilated the Russian imperial navy. The Japanese quickly adopted the delusional idea that they could be the sole area superpower with a world-historical mission to rule over Asia. They assumed a divine right to terrorize and exterminate the subordinate nations and peoples in the name of their Emperor. Therefore, victories may have bad long-term consequences for the victor, which

is ironic. The USA has proved this, and today, Mr. Putin's new Russia consciously emulates the military tradition and successes of Stalin's Soviet Union in the Great Patriotic War.

Think of the counterfactual irony that nothing good would have resulted from Japan's and Germany's victory in World War Two—as I suppose—and we find a novel nexus of tragic irony in history:

Proposition four: Nothing good would have followed from victory, but total defeat was a blessing regardless of the degree of the disaster.

This is more paradoxical than it may look because defeat in war is complex. In Finland, the socialists and communists had a landslide victory in the post-war parliamentary elections, and for a while, the possibility of a communist coup hung in the air. The nation that fought the Soviet Union so bitterly wanted to emulate their social order and longed for their friendship. The Japanese nation welcomed the American occupying forces and eagerly cooperated with them. Loss and defeat are paradoxical and often ironic events that Stockholm Syndrome may illustrate.¹⁷ Germans may have been reluctant to let Nazism go but welcomed the massive American financial help under the Marshall Plan and Mutual Security Plan (1948–1961).¹⁸ The start of the Cold War provided a good reason for the Americans, and the plans were a great success. In the end, German Bundesrepublik, in various ways, apologized for its dark past. I cannot comment on the Federal Republic of Germany. All this lends credibility to the idea of a healthy loss without lessening its supreme tragic irony. Nations may embrace their defeat and change their ways for the better. At the same time, an inconclusive defeat may lead to troublesome revanchist desires and plans, exemplified by Finland after the Winter War and Germany after the Great War. So we have here a new nexus of tragic irony? Let us agree that it would have been better if Japan had not won the Japan-Russia War of 1905 because its long-term effects were disastrous. If Japan had not won the war of 1905, it would not have suffered so tragically in the future. Accordingly, winning and losing wars are equally vulnerable to tragic irony. We should focus on suffering and the logic of warfare indeed guarantees it. The defeated state, as well as the victor, will suffer and might suffer needlessly. The winner may gain nothing despite suffering from the war and the loser will gain much. Should we say Japan did not fight a tragic war against the USA because it benefited so much later? But Japan's case was tragic because the benefits of free democracy and economic prosperity required such a major disaster. In other words, it is tragic that Japan could not secure freedom, peace, and welfare less disastrously. Moreover, Japan's and Germany's cases fit under the Hegelian idea of the cunning of reason (CHR): those nations' goals in the first half of the twentieth century were evil and unjustifiable, yet the higher goal was their happiness and liberalization, or less mystically, the great lottery of history offered them its prize, quite independently of their earlier sins. The Soviet Union and Russia

have found their military inheritance a heavy burden, which does not promise them much short term good. But we cannot predict what the future will bring, as Hegel says.

3. Controversy and Existential Beliefs

Irony and tragedy are certainly connected in the strongest possible way. But the idea of tragedy depends on how we read the relevant texts, as I showed in the previous part and will further discuss in the present part. Finally, I summarize it all in the additional notes in the end. When we use different vocabularies, we see ironies emerge, and therefore tragedies—this is what I showed in the second part. Now we must discuss the essential conditions of acceptance of our readings.

Methodologically, my approach is linguistic and dialectical. I do not discuss historical events as hard facts of the past. Instead, I focus on how we approach, discuss, and evaluate familiar events, their causes, and consequences. This is dialectical literary criticism. The new narratives generate a side stream of speculations of how the facts might have turned out: counterfactual history. But we must not permit wild imagination and groundless speculation to proliferate and create misleading populist and nationalist accounts of the past. Therefore, the narratives I study have their background in critical historical research and rest on a realistic evaluative tradition. We can find irony in history by reading and redescribing a context *à la* Rorty. However, it should convince our audiences, which may or may not happen. Some cases contain innocent and easy conversational issues, but the political cases discussed above are essentially contested or contestable. Some audiences may agree, but others can still reject them.

History invites narrations, interpretations, evaluations, and even moralism that are contestable. In the Hegelian language, we are agents, autonomous subjects, and blind instruments of grand historical processes. At the same time, we have aims that are part of the ideal goal of history. This is ironic, sometimes tragically ironic. I support and promote my country's belligerent foreign policy goals, and then I get drafted into the army and sent to an obscure war to fight and die. I may go happily or reluctantly, but to go, I must. In the end, I am a hero or a villain. Around one thousand two hundred Finns volunteered in the Waffen SS (1941–1943) at the Eastern front; today, their status is still debatable, perhaps essentially contested. (Pajunen and Karjalainen 2019). Did they participate in atrocities? Who wants to know? They would be heroes had Germany won the war; now, their status is undefined because of Finland's tragic role in World War Two and Operation Barbarossa. Once the war is over and its causes and consequences evaluated, popular values determine the acceptance of suggested narratives and history writing. All this tends to be partial and even

partisan, as historians are expected to serve the nation's values and current political trends. Historical writings look like ironic business in all their nationalism and efforts to make war look like an adventure for the brave. In many countries, history textbooks are of dubious value as well. The public buys and reads war histories that satisfy their expectations, as a visit to a major bookseller's history shelves indicates. An example of militaristic sentimentalism is Anzac Day (25 April) in New Zealand and Australia. In Finland, Independence Day (6 December 1917) is a somber event in remembrance of all the sacrifices made by our mothers and fathers. These nations celebrate their losses, which is telling in itself.

Think once again of propositions one and two. Could we ever reach a consensus concerning them? Consider the Finnish Reds after their revolution, defeated by the Whites in 1918, when the revengeful White terror started. Would any of them have agreed that their war and suffering were pointless and their efforts tragically ironic in the counterfactual sense? How callous and cynical to suggest that their victory would have been a disaster! They needed their convictions as consolation; for them, their victory promised a new and just world. But such beliefs are of a special existentialist type: to continue living without them is impossible. Hence, the counterfactual cases of tragic irony are disturbing—ironies are supposed to be. After suffering so much, trust in our worthwhile efforts is essential. If this is impossible, only one escape road is open: love the winner, adopt their values, and join their politics—if they accept us or invite us to do so. The winner may be cruel, like the Finnish Whites and the winners of the Great War who denigrated their former enemy. This is hard for the loser and drives them away from the idea of counterfactual tragic irony toward a trivial nexus: we were cheated; we could have won. We fought so well and would have been ready to continue had our politicians not let us down—this is a simple, tragic irony with revanchist implications, as exemplified by the Nazi conspiratorial dogma of the Great War.

The counterfactual tragic irony may hurt the winners' sensibilities. They hear that their victory, like the Allies' victory in the Great War, was meaningless because its aftermath brought so much needless suffering to the winners in World War Two. Great Britain needed and received more Marshall Plan money than any other country. Yet, they cannot agree that life would have been better had they not won, and Hitler kept at bay. As a counterfactual ironist says, victories empower belligerent forces that will bring the nation untold suffering in the future—think of Japan in 1905 and the Soviet Union after 1945. Victories may feed nationalism, militarism, authoritarian pro-state feelings, and all that second-rate state propaganda, as happened in Russia after World War Two. To call a victory harmful may look not like an ironic nexus but a cynical attack against all that is noble and valuable in our political existence—another set of existential beliefs. The counterfactual tragic irony touches on facts,

values, and valuations, whose real meaning may remain hidden from most citizens and look essentially contestable.

For these reasons, the tragic irony in history and, to a lesser degree, the non-trivial idea of tragedy may convince larger audiences only if viewed from a longer historical perspective. As Hegel says, the Owl of Minerva flies only at dusk, when it—paradoxically— can see better, or it flies only when the day's work is completed. (Hegel [1821] 1969, Preface, p. 13). In the same way, counterfactual tragic irony requires an extended, objective viewpoint purified from ideologies, moralism, and nostalgia. And even then, one should not expect the universal audience to agree with the ironists. Such tragic nexuses make wars and suffering look even more intolerably catastrophic. Nothing is more painful than needless suffering, and war is the primary example. Tragic irony does not leave room for consoling heroism and patriotic sentimentalism. Here irony indeed approaches cynicism. However, such nexuses lose their bite in an extended time perspective, making a cool objective view possible. The former partisan issues vanish, impossible evaluations become viable, and the ironies of the times start looking evident. What is too close, we cannot see clearly.

Concluding remarks: A perceptive and critical reader may ask, what then is the payoff of my analysis? Do we learn anything new about Rorty and Hegel and their conceptions of irony and identity? What ultimately is the contribution of this essay to existing knowledge? I started by distinguishing between disaster and tragedy, and I did it in the way that makes tragedies inherently ironic, thus leading us, via irony in tragedy, to tragic irony.

Behind this simple idea lurks a medley of theoretical issues, such as Hegel's cunning of historical reason and Richard Rorty's idea of the ironies in literary criticism. I do not aim at any novel interpretations of these well-known ideas. They come up during my main line of argument as methodological tools and, incidentally, illustrations of the complexity of the key issues.

In the second part of this article, I applied the tools formulated in the first part to show how war and its outcomes exemplify not only historical disasters but tragic ironies, especially when we use counterfactual conditionals to point out what might have been the case. Here we read disastrous historical events dialectically to point out their hidden ironies. This is literary criticism in Rorty's sense, and at the same time shows how Hegel's cunning of reason works in history. A state that goes to war they know they cannot win is a supremely tragic case. And they lose, which proves to be better than winning would have been. To reach such a conclusion, we must read the standard history texts using a novel approach and vocabulary. We focus on what might have happened and this entails the ironies of the critically dialectical approach. My aim has been to provide a new interpretation of tragic irony, independently of its roots in the scripted contexts of tragic play and apply it to historical disasters.

In the third part of this article, I focused on the essentially contested nature of reading the historical texts in part two. Hegel says the Owl of Minerva flies only late in the evening, when everything is said and done, and the controversial issues are seemingly settled. I discuss tragic events both when the issues are still fresh and fully controversial and also when an established reading has emerged. Tragedies are often bitter issues that invite partisan readings, and historical tragedies can be read in various ways, which again entails their ultimate ironies. Sometimes disasters turn out to be tragedies, sometimes alleged tragedies are just disasters. To start a war that one cannot win and then lose, is no tragedy, regardless of the extent of the ensuing disaster. To win a war only to create a disaster is a tragedy. To say this is and expect that the victims agree is, perhaps, futile. This may be the ultimate faith of dialectical literary criticism.

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