

Russia versus the West and the power of words: a response to Tatyana Tolstaya

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Abstract. In this paper, I respond to an essay by Tatyana Tolstaya, which describes a contrast between the Russian and the Western perspective on words. Her contrast may generally be true, but I know of a counterexample: a tale about a Western philosopher and his followers and what happened to them.

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In a well-crafted essay, the famous Russian writer Tatyana Tolstaya vividly represents the Russian perspective on writers as skilled or inspired users of words. She tells us:

Throughout the entire history of Russian literature, the Russian writer has never been seen by the reading public as “simply” a poet, journalist, philosopher, or scribbler – that is, as a person freely expressing his or her own thoughts and feelings or merely entertaining the reader. The Russian writer has always been seen as a prophet or preacher, a dangerous free-thinker, or a revolutionary. The very ability to manipulate words and to articulate one’s thoughts placed the individual in a suspect position. The word was seen as a weapon far more fearsome than poison or a dagger... (1992: 121)

Tolstaya continues:

...the word, whether spoken or printed, represents a power greater than that of the atom. This is an entirely Russian view of literature, without parallel in the West.

And everyone in Russia, it seems, shares it: the tsars and their slaves, censors and dissidents, writers and critics. liberals and conservatives. (1992: 122)

I am not sure if Tolstaya accurately characterizes the West, for I know a little story about a Western philosopher, though I don't think it existed when she wrote. I should warn readers that it is not entirely pleasant – writing so often must be reducing pleasantness slightly.

Once upon a time, there was a Western philosopher and he wrote a book expressing a philosophy of justice. He began to gather around him some followers who desired to promote his work. Let us call the philosopher R and the community consisting of him and his followers community R.

One day, this small community encountered some economists. The economists said, “Your ideas can be formulated in mathematical models. But you need our help to do that. With our help, you will become a great influence in economics.” An influential member of community R looked at the mathematical symbols and thought to himself, “It will be a great labour to learn the mathematics and perhaps too difficult for people with our natural talents. So let us ally with these economists.” The other members followed his advice and so an alliance with these economists was formed.

Soon afterwards, this small community encountered some lawyers. The lawyers said, “Your ideas need to be turned into legal proposals. But you need to know the law as it is to make these proposals. You need our help to do that. With our help, you will become a great influence in the law.” The influential member of community R looked at the legal language and thought to himself, “It will be a great labour to learn the law and perhaps too difficult for people with our

natural talents. So let us ally with these lawyers.” The other members followed his advice and so an alliance with these lawyers was formed.

Soon afterwards, community R encountered some philosophers. These were not grand system-building philosophers. They spent their time examining chains of reasoning and identifying ambiguities and trying to achieve accurate formulations of theses. They said, “This book expressing a philosophy suffers from ambiguities and poor formulations. We can help you.” But this time the influential member of community R thought to himself, “Thanks, but we can do that by ourselves.”

Unfortunately, they were never able to reach an adequate level in this task. They attracted a few people who could help but the task was too large. Many of the ambiguities were not resolved. Better formulations were not found. And their premise-by-premise reconstructions were riddled with mistakes. They made little or no sense. Every week people pointed out tiny-looking problems, which on closer inspection threatened the whole system! It would have been easier for them to learn the mathematics or the law than learn to spot these problems.

Questions. I was wondering, can *PhilPapers* get a convincing imitator of Tatyana Tolstaya to upload an imitation essay onto the new manuscripts section?¹ And can the University of Manchester, with their wealth and connections, get such a person – can they get The Prince of Cornell, in every sense of that title, or whoever that pasticheur is? I should probably clarify this question.

¹ I have been reading some of James Leshner’s PDFs. I read about Xenophanes. I know it sounds stupid for someone who has written a tale to say this, but the rainbow-imagery league is difficult. Have you seen the competition?

References

Leshner, J. 1999. Early Interest in Knowledge. In A. Long (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tolstaya, T. (translated by J. Gambrell) 1992. Is There Hope For Pushkin's Children? *Wilson Quarterly* 16 (Winter): 122-129.