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Boele, O.F.; Schellens, D.E.A.

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4. Reading and Worshiping Nikolai Rubtsov. Evolution of a Literary Cult

Otto Boele¹ 

(1) Leiden University, Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society, Leiden, The Netherlands

 **Otto Boele**

Email: o.f.boele@hum.leidenuniv.nl

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“Rubtsov is a poet who has struck the Russian soul like no one else before him, not a single creative person! If Pushkin has captured (our) minds, Rubtsov has captured our souls” (Discussion, August 25, 2014). These accolades, posted on the social media platform Vkontakte, may strike us as slightly excessive. It is one thing to compare Nikolai Rubtsov (1936–1971) to Alexander Pushkin, it is quite another to declare their equality and suggest that when push comes to shove ‘peasant poet’ Rubtsov speaks more to the Russian heart than does Pushkin. Posted by an anonymous reader, the comment seriously reshuffles the pantheon of Russian poetry; it places at the very top a poorly educated man from the provinces, a former sailor and metal worker, who, by the time he died in a domestic row with his girlfriend at the age of thirty-five, had barely published four books of poetry.

The reason for quoting this exceptional praise is to illustrate the boundless admiration that large groups of Russophone readers feel for Rubtsov today. At *stihi.ru*, a website that publishes classical poetry and allows aspiring beginners to publish their own, readers repeatedly praise Rubtsov as “a wonderful Russian poet,” “a great Russian poet” and even “the last great Russian poet” who continues to outshine all of his contemporaries. Among Russian critics and literary scholars, however, opinions about Rubtsov’s lasting significance are deeply divided. Mikhail Gasparov once characterized his verse as indistinguishable from the second-rate poetry that used to be published in popular turn-of-the-century journals such as *Niva* (Field) and *Rodina* (Motherland) (2001, 274). Mikhail Epshtein’s verdict is equally devastating when he observes that Rubtsov’s thematic scope and use of motifs add nothing to the achievements of Sergei Yesenin, his immediate precursor (1990, 274). According to Eduard

Shneiderman (2005), a friend of Rubtsov's in the early 1960s, Rubtsov's generally most esteemed work suffers from "semantic monotony" (85) and "emotional homogeneity" (91). Rather than showing the Russian village, Rubtsov simply declared his love rhetorically in accessible, but somewhat hackneyed language.

At the other end of the critical spectrum, Rubtsov is regarded as a poet of genius, even as a symbol of authentic Russianness. Like two other peasant poets before him, Nikolai Kliuev and Yesenin, Rubtsov is often associated with a Russia that no longer exists; nationalist critics tend to interpret his checkered life as an "allegory for the tragedy of the entire Russian nation in the twentieth century" (Hodgson and Smith 2020, 161). In the writing of Stanislav Kuniaev and Vladimir Bondarenko, household names for the readership of the conservative literary journal *Nash sovremennik* (Our Contemporary), the focus tends to be more on Rubtsov's biography than on the poetic qualities of his verse which are simply taken for granted.¹

The critical reception of Rubtsov's work, as well as the appropriation of village poetry by nationalists is described in great detail by Katharine Hodgson in her (co-authored) book on canon formation and national identity in post-Soviet Russia (2020, 193–205). In general, Russian critics agree that Rubtsov continues the "interrupted 'new peasant poets' tradition" (202), with some emphasizing his preoccupation with the declining countryside and others highlighting the apocalyptic overtones in his verse. Because Hodgson's main interest lies with how this process is shaped by literary professionals and institutions, she does not discuss the response by non-professional readers which is the concern of the present chapter.

The 'ordinary' reader of Rubtsov's poetry does figure in a recent article by Sergei Levochskii et al. (2022), which is based on extensive fieldwork that was conducted in the poet's native region. Building on two models of literary authority as proposed by Boris Dubin, the 'poet-classic' and the 'poet-star,' the authors distinguish between two corresponding forms of engagement with a poet's work, one affirming its 'canonical' status through ritual and performance (for example, the declamation of poetry as part of the school curriculum), the other establishing an emotional ('romantic') and more individualized connection between reader and text (235–236). In reality, the two models of authority may intersect, even within a single reader who can participate in ritualized celebrations of the poet (poetry festivals) and then assert his personal affection for his work in a private conversation (250). Using Michel de Certeau's terminology, the authors point out that the authority of a poet-classic is formed by the "strategies" of institutions, whereas the image of the poet-star is the result of readers' "tactics." (238)

To describe the tension between the two models of poetic authority, Levochskii and his co-authors rely on interviews with individual Rubtsov readers from the Vologda region; they do not look at social

media or poetry websites and they ignore one aspect of readers' tactics which in the West has come to occupy a central place in the field of fan studies: readers' creative appropriation of popular texts through rewritings and continuations of the original. Although Rubtsov only wrote lyrical poetry and did not create a fictional universe inspiring readers to produce their own 'fanfic' (as is the case with *Harry Potter*), textual productivity among his readership has been quite significant, resulting in recordings of performances (musical or otherwise), poems, biographical dramas and even screenplays. While these amateur texts and performances may echo many of the sentiments that we find on the pages of *Nash sovremennik*, they also bespeak a sense of personal responsibility. Rather than leaving it to the professionals or contending themselves with their personal appreciation of Rubtsov's verse, these readers feel called upon to ward off unjustified attacks on their hero, explain to their fellow admirers the 'true essence' of his work and otherwise contribute to the preservation of his work and memory.

This chapter, then, seeks to shift the focus from the professional sphere of literary criticism to the experience of ordinary readers, and from personal reflections on Rubtsov's poetry in the private sphere to reader-produced texts and commemorative practices in a more or less public setting. Relying on a relatively new model of readership and textual productivity (see next section), I hope to demonstrate that these 'amateur' texts on Rubtsov, as well as the discussions to which they give rise, play a crucial role in creating a group awareness along literary, ideological and even ethnic lines. This awareness is also sustained by the elaborate infrastructure that readers have helped create, ranging from Rubtsov museums and memorial sites to annual poetry festivals. As one Rubtsov enthusiast-turned-author has put it: "People who are fond of [Rubtsov's] work treat each other as like-minded people, they 'recognize' each other, call each other by his name" (*pereklikaiutsia ego imenem*) (Panova 2008). What will become clear is that what started as an "alternative social community" (Jenkins 1992, 213) at the brink of the 1990s, a relatively small group of connoisseurs has by now morphed into a conglomerate of more or less established, often state-sponsored organizations that promote Nikolai Rubtsov as a *national* poet. To put it in more abstract terms, this chapter is about the nexus between fan behavior, canon formation and the shaping of collective identities.

Theoretical Model

That reading is a creative activity has been acknowledged by a great number of theoreticians, ranging from structuralist Jan Mukařovský (1970) and the main figure-heads of reader-response theory (Iser 1976; Fish 1980; Jauss 1974), to scholars of popular culture who refuse to regard media consumers as the passive and unimaginative recipients they were once believed to be (de Certeau 1984; Staiger 2005). Using Michel de Certeau's work on everyday life, specifically his ideas on reading as a way of

creatively appropriating (literary) texts, Henry Jenkins and others have put the traditional producer–consumer (author–reader) dichotomy on its head by treating consumers (usually fans) as producers in their own right; fans invent alternative plotlines, write sequels to existing narratives or find other ways of creatively expressing their relationship with the source text.

Other scholars, such as Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, have sought to refine the very notion of the media consumer. They offer a model in which the reader (viewer) is replaced by an “audience continuum” reflecting increasing levels of emotional involvement, expertise, and (textual) productivity:

Consumer–Fan–Cultist–Enthusiast–Petty Producer

These five categories represent individuals and groups that differ in their “object of focus, extent and nature of media use and degree and nature of organization” (2014, 162). Fans are more explicitly attached to their favorite TV program or novel than the average consumer is, but hardly interact with other fans and therefore lack the level of organization that is characteristic of the cultist. Cultists exchange materials, develop network relations, and increasingly redirect their focus towards specialized literature that fans and consumers tend to ignore. Enthusiasts are formally more organized and also more focused in terms of media consumption; they are the driving forces behind fan conventions and other community building activities. An example of ‘Rubtsov enthusiasts’ would be the organizers of the annual poetry festival, *Rubtsovskaiia osen’* (Rubtsov autumn), at least at the initial stages of its existence in the late 1990s.

The last category, the petty producer, is particularly relevant with regard to the dimension of textual productivity, but Abercrombie and Longhurst stress that all categories of the model “produce” something if only a personal opinion expressed in a private conversation. Whereas the cultists and the enthusiasts are typically involved in the production of actual texts (fan fiction, poems, songs) and material objects (paintings, costumes) within a knowable community, the petty producer serves an *imagined* community by producing for the market. Importantly, the continuum does not simply present five different positions, but also suggests a “possible career path.” (2014, 165). A person may move along the continuum and thus develop from a fan into a petty producer.

Applying the audience continuum model to Rubtsov’s readership is not without its hazards. Fandom and reception studies is almost exclusively concerned with popular culture which lacks the academic embeddedness and traditional prestige of ‘serious’ literature. Fan communities such as those described by Jenkins usually emerge out of nowhere, that is without any state support, whereas the role of established critics and literary scholars in the creation of a poetic cult is, of course, considerable. And yet

because it regards the identity of the media consumer as inherently fluid, the audience continuum model may prove to be useful; it allows us to understand how and to what extent Rubtsov's readership developed into an imagined community in which a sense of "horizontal comradeship" (to use Benedict Anderson's term [2006, 7]) prevails over the more traditional distinction between literary professionals and non-professionals.

Nikolai Koniaev: Fan–Producer–Postulator

As a first test case, let us turn to Nikolai Koniaev (1949–2018), a prose writer who spent most of his life in St Petersburg (Leningrad). In the early 1990s, Koniaev struggled to live by his pen, although eventually he succeeded in making a decent living churning out novels and non-fiction on historical and religious themes. He published in *Sever* (North), *Molodaia gvardia* (Young Guard) and *Nash sovremennik*, conservative journals that have always cultivated an image of Rubtsov as a national martyr. Especially *Nash sovremennik* has been adamant to protect Rubtsov's memory by devoting large sections to him in the January issue of each 'round' anniversary year (Rubtsov was born and died in January).

Koniaev published numerous articles and several (overlapping) books on Rubtsov, including a biography in the ZhSL series (Koniaev 2001),² but I will confine myself to his diary in which he recorded his own reading experience. Covering the period 1986–2000, in its reworked form the diary was published first in installments in *Sever* (2011–2018) and then separately in two volumes: *The Rowdy and Sacred 1990s* (2016) and *A Farewell to the Millennium* (2018).³ Although it is impossible to tell how significantly the original entries were changed, they retain the impression of spontaneity allowing us to experience the Gorbachev and Yeltsin years through the eyes of the author. Koniaev comments, mostly sarcastically, on the political changes in the country and his own tribulations as a writer as he navigates the free market with its mixed blessings, but another important thread is his growing affinity with Rubtsov. The first time he mentions him is on August 29, 1987, when he is only an informed admirer of his poetry, the last entry is from June 15, 2000, by which time he has already written two books on Rubtsov's life and work (Koniaev 1997; Koniaev 2001).

Given the vast number of his publications on Rubtsov, it would seem that Koniaev quickly outgrew the role of enthusiast and even petty producer, but at the brink of the 1980s Koniaev did engage with Rubtsov in 'fannish behavior' and literary tourism, the "practice of visiting places associated with

writers and their works to supplement the experience of reading” (Watson 2020, 1). In other words, the potential career path suggested by the audience continuum model—developing from an individual reader and fan into a (petty) producer—can be gleaned very clearly using only Koniaev’s diary.

Koniaev’s ‘career’ really takes off in the summer of 1989 when he visits Rubtsov’s grave in Vologda together with his friend, Viacheslav Belkov. Because Belkov is more knowledgeable (a true *rubtsoved*, according to Koniaev), he is in charge of the whole enterprise, insisting that they honor the poet’s memory with a glass of the cheap port wine that Rubtsov used to drink (20 June, 1989). The ritual quickly turns into a binge, however, leaving the two friends no choice but to call off their visit to the cemetery. The next day, standing at Rubtsov’s grave, they share a bottle of cognac, ruefully aware that it is “not a proper Rubtsov drink” and the ritual has been somewhat spoilt.

A few months later Koniaev and Belkov stop by at the apartment where Rubtsov was killed. Nothing in the apartment reminds of him, except for the “two-burner stove” which is still being used by the current tenant (16 December, 1989). Looking at the stove, Koniaev is perplexed by the incongruity of Rubtsov’s magnitude as a poet and the almost complete absence of any material traces of his existence. A similar feeling creeps up on him when he travels to Nikol’skoe, the village in which Rubtsov spent most of his childhood. He is pleased to see that the village’s former orphanage is now housing a make-shift Rubtsov museum (13 August, 1990), but when he spots two newly acquired exhibits—Rubtsov’s coat and his accordion—they only remind him of how poorly Rubtsov lived, leaving nothing behind “except for his poetry.” (16 August, 1990)

Despite the obvious aim to establish and deepen an emotional bond with the poet, pilgrimages like these leave Koniaev unsatisfied. The places he visits somehow fail to conjure up a satisfactory image of Rubtsov as if he has already faded from national memory. Almost twenty years after Rubtsov’s tragic death a solid biography is still missing (22 June, 1989). Koniaev’s first attempt to fill this lacuna is the publication of a piece of fan drama titled *My Peaceful Native Land* (after one of Rubtsov’s best known poems) (Koniaev 1990). Featuring only three characters, a “woman” and “two actors,” the play clearly seeks to idealize Rubtsov by inundating the viewer with lengthy quotes from his work and praise from authoritative critics. The play looks more like a poetry recital than a piece of drama with a clear plot, but it manages to tick most of the boxes of Rubtsov’s troublesome life including the early loss of his parents, his expulsion from the Literary Institute in 1964 and the state of permanent homelessness and poverty from which he would never escape. One of the characters acknowledges that Rubtsov’s life was not without “certain excesses,” but the overall impression is that of an artist who never betrayed his genius.⁴

Exemplifying a more general tendency among literary nationalists to gloss over objectionable behavior by Russian authors in light of their suffering and early death (Parthé 2004, 120), Koniaev's play presents a curious amalgam of poetry, drama and literary criticism with strong hagiographic leanings.

Gradually Koniaev becomes aware that he is developing a personal relationship with Rubtsov. Reading his poetry, he sometimes feels it was written exclusively for him (21 July, 1990) and when he sets about writing a full-scale biography, it turns out the "book writes itself" with witnesses supplying exactly the kind of information he was looking for (27 February, 1991). Koniaev also records several dreams he has had about Rubtsov, including a revelatory dream that features Rubtsov and Peter II, Peter the Great's grandson, who was proclaimed emperor in 1727, but died less than three years later at the age of fourteen. Wondering what Rubtsov and Peter II have in common that would justify their joint appearance in a dream, Koniaev concludes that each of them represents a critical juncture in Russian history. Peter II could have stopped the destructive reforms of his grandfather but was prevented from doing so by the corrupting influence of Aleksei Dolgorukov; Rubtsov was given to Russia as the "Grace of God," but that opportunity too may be wasted on contemporary Russia (25 September, 1990).

By the mid-1990s, Koniaev is already a (petty) producer and even on the verge of becoming what Dovic and Helgason have called a "postulator" (2016, 82): an influential cultural agent who is involved in the production of a writer's canonical status.⁵ In 1995 he is busy lobbying with the city authorities of St Petersburg to install a memorial plaque at the building where Rubtsov used to live in the early 1960s. The plan is rejected on the grounds that Rubtsov has been dead less than thirty years (the required minimum in St Petersburg), a rule that in practice is applied quite inconsistently, Koniaev observes as he thumbs through the directory *Leningrad Writers 1939–1981*; some writers got 'their' plaque much earlier. Pondering the deeper meaning of this injustice, Koniaev cannot but conclude that Rubtsov's marginalization continues and a legitimate wish of "the Russian people" is being ignored (1 July, 1995).

By framing the decision of the city authorities as going against the will of the Russian people, Koniaev employs the rhetoric of resentment that we find in so many nationalist publications of this period (Brudny 1998; Parthé 2004). With sarcastic approval he refers to Daniil Granin's observation that the inhabitants of St Petersburg form a 'nationality' of their own, a peculiarity that would explain (in Koniaev's opinion) why the city is incapable of appreciating a truly *Russian* poet (20 March, 1998). Yet this perspective also allows Koniaev to discover encouraging signs beyond the capitals testifying to Rubtsov's popularity nationwide. The unveiling of a memorial plaque in Vologda and the upgrading of the museum in Nikol'skoe convince Koniaev that "Rubtsov hasn't died yet." (13 January, 1996) Even the town of Nevskaja Dubrovka has a street named after him to mark his 60th birthday (17 October, 1996). The most telling piece of evidence, however, comes from the industrial city of Dzerzhinsk which

sports its own Rubtsov museum, despite the fact that the poet never visited the city. Koniaev explains this incongruity by arguing that Rubtsov lived in so many different places that he simply “dissolved in Russia’s immensity” (20 March, 1998). Small wonder that his poetry has ‘settled’ in Dzerzhinsk too; his verse “is all about the life of the Russian heartland, which our schools and institutes, radio and television, newspapers and magazines have diligently passed over” (20 March, 1998).

With these bittersweet reflections on Rubtsov as the bard of the Russian heartland, Koniaev follows a common pattern in post-Soviet nationalist discourse which often imagines the provinces as a repository of authentic ‘Russianness’ (Parts 2018, 14). It is here, far away from the capitals, that the national spirit is believed to have been preserved. As we shall see in the next section, Rubtsov’s supposedly marginal position in Russian literature and the notion of the Russian provinces being somehow ‘neglected’ or ‘ignored’ do not only interlock in Koniaev’s writing; they often occur in tandem in the reactions of ordinary readers who may self-identify as provincials. Either way we can detect the contours of a certain group awareness in which Rubtsov’s poetry and life story take center stage.

Rubtsov House Museums

In the early 1990s, Koniaev had every reason to be concerned over the preservation of Rubtsov’s memory. The only city to sport a Rubtsov monument was Tot’ma,⁶ an authoritative biography had yet to be written, and the first comprehensive collection of his work would be published only in 2000. Twenty years later the situation has vastly improved. Apart from the plaque on the house where Rubtsov was killed (Vologda 1996), busts have been unveiled in Cherepovets (1998), Yemetsk (2004) and Murmansk (2006),⁷ as well as a four-meter-high statue in Vologda (1998) and another one in Nikol’skoe (2023). Koniaev’s lobby for a plaque on the dormitory of the Kirov factory in St Petersburg eventually proved successful; it was installed in 2001, exactly thirty years after Rubtsov’s death. All of these projects were realized at the initiative of individual citizens who succeeded in soliciting support from local companies (such as Severstal’ in Cherepovets) or securing extra funding from the local authorities (Korablev 1998).

Memory sites with an educational function have also increased in number: cultural centers-cum-libraries with one or two rooms dedicated to Nikolai Rubtsov (such as the Rubtsov museum in Dzerzhinsk) or house museums, meticulous recreations (or fabrications) of places where Rubtsov once lived. Building on the work of Harald Hendrix, Nicola Watson points out that within the genre of the “writer’s house museum” many subcategories can be distinguished, but they all have in common that

they are “designed to ‘effect’ a figure of the author.” (Watson 2020, 4) By displaying the author’s personal possessions, we share in the fiction that the owner “has just left” the room and might return any minute (5).

Although Rubtsov lacked a place of his own and had very few personal possessions, Rubtsov enthusiasts, petty producers and postulators (mostly friends and colleagues) have proven quite resourceful in creating house museums, or variations thereof, initially by holding on to the ‘less-is-more principle.’ This means that the scarcity of authentic objects and personal belongings becomes a signifier of the poet’s ‘righteous’ destitution (as opposed to ‘evil’ materialism).

The first Rubtsov museum to open its doors (located in Rubtsov’s old orphanage) counted just one room when Koniaev visited it in 1990 and only gradually developed into a multifunctional venue hosting exhibitions and conferences (Koreneva 2008). An even humbler example is the tiny house museum organized by Ninel’ Starichkova, Rubtsov’s old landlady in Vologda, in 2001; it was little more than a single room which she rented out to him and supposedly left untouched ever since. Until Starichkova’s death in 2008, visitors could marvel at such relics as Rubtsov’s personal mirror, his worn-out hat and scarf, an old reproduction of a painting by Aleksei Savrasov and a “curtain he and Viktor Astaf’ev had bought together.” (“Okazyvaetsia, muzei Rubtsova v Vologde est” 2002) Such details not only confer extra value upon the object in question, but simultaneously serve to underline Rubtsov’s material aloofness. Even the few things he did possess did not really have a hold on him and he simply left them behind the moment he moved house.

A costlier and more recent attempt to eternalize Rubtsov’s memory is the Museum of a Single Poem in the hamlet of Anikin Pochinok (some 200 kilometers east of Vologda) which opened its doors in 2022 (“V Totemskom raione otkrylsia muzei odnogo stikhotvoreniia “Russkii ogonek” 2022). It is a monument to one of Rubtsov’s most popular poems from the mid-1960s, “Russian Light,” as well as to Maria Bogdanova, the woman who let him into this very house on a cold November night in 1963, thereby providing him with the inspiration for the poem. To the visitor the thrill of stepping into a fully restored and decorated house that attracted Rubtsov with its “faint Russian light” decades ago, undoubtedly adds to the epiphany of ‘Russianness’ which this autobiographical poem seeks to instill (note the tautological qualifier “Russian” in the title). By having the hostess kindly refuse the guest’s well-intended offer to pay for her hospitality (“Gospod’ s toboi, my deneg ne berem”), Rubtsov implicitly juxtaposes ‘rural’ (Russian) kindheartedness to ‘urban’ materialism, a contrast that is then summarized in the often-quoted lines: “Kindness can only be paid for in kindness, // Love can only be

paid for in love.” (Rubtsov 2000) With its clearly defined referents in Rubtsov’s life and work, the Museum of a Single Poem lets readers experience vicariously one of the most renowned episodes of his biography.

If the first two house museums discussed here can be said to be representative of the 1990s when financial means were scarce and the commitment of individuals was crucial, then the Museum of a Single Poem may be considered typical of the last two decades when bigger budgets have become available.⁸ This is not to suggest that the Rubtsov cult has been completely co-opted by state institutions and individual actors are sidelined; the Museum of a Single Poem was made possible by private funding coming from two Rubtsov enthusiasts and an additional Presidential grant (“V Totemskom raione otkrylsia muzei odnogo stikhotvoreniia ‘Russkii ogonek’” 2022). Yet literary cults are highly susceptible to manipulation and often the product of persons or institutions interested in creating a very specific kind of public memory (Hendrix 2008, 1). In comparison with the first attempts to ‘museumize’ Rubtsov’s dwellings, the more recent house museums emphasize not his homelessness, but the indissoluble ties with his native soil. This defines him primarily as a *Russian* poet (and a poet from the Vologda region), rooted in the spiritual traditions of his (small) motherland, rather than as the forlorn figure that we encountered in Koniaev’s diary. This development shows that as fandom practices continue, Rubtsov’s recognition has taken on a more ‘official’ character, anchoring him firmly in the canon of Russia’s twentieth-century literature.

Turning now to readers’ immediate textual output, we will see how Rubtsov’s public memory is negotiated in politically charged comments and poems. I will first discuss a few of the most telling examples of fan poetry and then a number of biographical dramas, in particular the indignant reactions that a screenplay has provoked among vigilant cultists and enthusiasts. Expressing itself in the policing and censoring of other readers, this almost sectarian engagement with Rubtsov’s legacy is equally capable of fostering a sense of community as the celebration of his poetry through original work and unambiguous praise.

Fan Poetry

Fan poetry can be defined very broadly as poetry written by fans. It is a ‘poetic’ (rhymed and often metered) way of expressing one’s admiration, no matter what its exact object is. In this case, fan poetry is understood more specifically as poetry written in response to Rubtsov’s work, verse that often echoes a specific poem and appears to initiate a poetic dialogue. The analogy with fan fiction is somewhat misleading, as I discussed earlier, but in a way the poems to be examined here can be seen as its ‘lyrical’

counterpart with readers (cultists and enthusiasts) becoming text producers in their own right and sharing their work with a community of co-admirers.

Though often available for download in PDF format, a substantial amount of Rubtsov-inspired poetry is published in print. Having successfully competed at one of the annual Rubtsov festivals, participants publish their poems in the ensuing almanac which usually also contains a number of papers emanating from the “literary-practical” conference “Rubtsov Readings.”⁹ The main selection criterion appears to be whether or not one belongs to the Rubtsov school in Russian poetry, a question that most contributors resolve by producing accessible nature poetry full of ‘Russian’ details or by simply praising Rubtsov’s work as the finest expression of the national character.¹⁰ As in Rubtsov’s own poetry, these amateur texts show a high concentration of “word-signals” (Ginzburg 1974, 26), denoting rural peacefulness (modest abodes, private corners, a mist-covered jetty) which are then contrasted with the temptations and dangers of the city (money, materialism, vanity). Some poems show the extent to which readers have mastered the common places of professional criticism deriding the “stadium poets”¹¹ with their “noise” while praising Rubtsov’s “timid, but brave Russian verse” (Obukhov 2009, 7).

Fan poetry published online tends to be linked more directly to individual Rubtsov poems; it therefore comes closer to de Certeau’s idea of textual “poaching” even if Rubtsov readers rarely allow themselves the liberties for which fan fiction is known. Stihi.ru, arguably the largest Russophone poetry website, offers its visitors the possibility of posting ‘reviews’ in the form of enthusiastic exclamations, but also more elaborate reactions and even entire poems.¹² Sometimes visitors react by pasting another Rubtsov poem in the review box without adding any text of their own.

Stihi.ru contains only three poems by Nikolai Rubtsov and yet they count among his most popular ones. “My Peaceful Native Land” (Tikhaia moia rodina) describes an imaginary visit to the poet’s native village which is represented by a list of ‘rural’ details: willows, an old church, a wagon train drives by, villagers peacefully work the land (Rubtsov 2000, 186). Despite minor changes, life is as slow-paced as it was when the speaker left the village. With its wistful intonation, dactylic trimeters, and concrete non-figurative language, “My Peaceful Native Land” illustrates the conventional character of Rubtsov’s poetry both in terms of subject matter and style.

To many readers, “My Peaceful Native Land” is about belonging and attaining inner harmony through a growing awareness of the “most burning, most mortal bond” connecting a person to his or her native region (Rubtsov 2000, 186). One reader, who identifies himself as a compatriot of Rubtsov’s, describes in iambic tetrameters his own return to his native village, highlighting such details as willows, a pond, the singing of a skylark, and, on a more philosophical level, the bond between past and present (Boev 2012).

In another reader's poem a father listens to his young daughter reading "My Peaceful Native Land" "like a prayer." Her voice triggers the father's own childhood memories, but also fills him with hope that this "prayer" will help save "our neglected land" and the "Almighty may forgive us our sins" (Tyrishkin 2015). If this reader is convinced of the healing nature of Rubtsov's verse, others project the idea of moral purification on Rubtsov himself, presenting him as a saint who was able to preserve his spiritual essence despite the corruption of his surroundings and his alcohol addiction:

Neither alcohol, nor life's filth
 could distort
 the true essence
 Of the Poet who in the midst of the hustle and bustle
 Was searching for dreams
 And green flowers.¹³ (Vedeneeva 2014, 2)

A fourth reader commenting on "My Peaceful Native Land" confines himself to a quatrain in which he calls Rubtsov simply the "Messiah from Vologda" (Stroganov Kupets 2015).

"Birches" (Beriozy) is a sentimental paeon to Russia's national tree (containing such traditional rhyme pairs as *beriozy* / *sliozy*) and its ability to make the lyrical "I" weep, especially in the autumn when the falling leaves remind him of his deceased parents:

I love the rustling of the birches
 When yellow leaves from birches fall,
 And as I listen tears come surging
 In eyes that seldom cry at all. (Rubtsov 1957. Translated by Peter Tempest)

While some readers react with fairly neutral poems, in a post-Soviet context the theme of (personal) loss can easily become a political statement as in the following poem posted in March 2010:

The poet was lucky, he didn't live to see,
 Didn't see the human meanness.
 How Russian birches are being cut
 With an ax (wielded) by an Uzbek hand. (Vorob'ev 2015)

While the whole idea of linking a poem from 1957 to the post-Soviet looting of Russia's natural resources may seem far-fetched, Rubtsov's fate has often been interpreted as both a foreshadowing and an allegory of the "Russian tragedy," a dramatic narrative of loss and disintegration through which

nationalists have tried to make sense of Russia's economic and demographic decline, especially in the 1990s (Oushakine 2009, 109). The poem quoted above clearly draws on the myth of the Russian tragedy conflating the notion of Russian victimhood with the fear of foreign exploitation, in this case the 'treacherous' export of Russian timber by the Uzbeks, once a brotherly nation within the Soviet family.

The longest of the three poems on stih.ru, "Visions on a Hill" (Videniia na kholme) is generally seen as one of Rubtsov's most ominous texts. It starts with a historical panorama of monumental suffering, in particular the ransacking of Russian cities by the army of Batu Khan in the thirteenth century. The poem then develops into a more traditional *laus patriae* and finally into a warning ("Russia, *Rus*! Save yourself, save yourself!" [Rubtsov 2000, 204]), urging the reader to be aware of the "new Tartars and Mongols" invading Russian territory. Although this detail remains unclear when examined in the context of 1960, the year when the poem was written, in hindsight "Visions on a Hill" has often been interpreted as a prophetic text anticipating the breakup of the Soviet Union and the destruction of Russian statehood. Commemorating the 30th anniversary of Rubtsov's death in 2001, critic Ivan Kostin conjectured that in writing "Visions on a Hill," the poet had fully apprehended the disastrous state in which Russia would find itself at the turn of the twentieth century (Kostin 2001). This interpretation seemed all the more persuasive in view of Rubtsov's own death which the poet had predicted with eerie precision.¹⁴

At stih.ru quite a few readers treat "Visions on a Hill" in this eschatological vein adding entire poems in which they bemoan the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also allude to its possible restoration:

"Visions on a Hill" — that is Holy Rus',

"Bleak light on the starry shores.."

I beg you, Russia, again –

Take back what is yours, if necessary by force. (Stroganov Kupets 2015)

Another reader strikes an even more defiant tone by listing Russia's historical enemies ("contemptuous Hitler," "*Bonapartik*," the "Japanese samurai"), including the USA and its "relentless" (but ultimately fruitless) efforts to frustrate Russia's ambitions. Posted in January 2016, the poem does not fail to mention scornfully the economic sanctions that were imposed on Russia following the annexation of Crimea in 2014:

And only the (United) States will not stop,

Trying to scare us from across the seas,

They meddle in the lives of other states,

By pursuing their rotten policies!

Afraid to challenge (us) openly,
 Like jackals they whine at the world,
 They threaten not to issue visas anymore,
 And to choke (us) economically! (Kamich 2016)

However, readers' reactions to "Visions on a Hill" are not exclusively informed by historical conflicts and international politics. Sometimes readers confine themselves to short comments about the purely *Russian* quality of Rubtsov's verse while adding contemptuous remarks about Yevtushenko, Voznesenskii and Brodsky, Rubtsov's contemporaries and eternal competitors (Volkov 2018). Although this bashing of the figureheads of the 1960s is occasionally frowned upon, readers who leave such negative comments do so on the assumption that the community shares their dislike of said poets. One reader adduces the most dramatic line of Rubtsov's poem ("Russia, *Rus'*, save yourself, save yourself!") and then replaces the Tartars and the Mongols with a reference to the "hordes" of the *estradaia poezii* (the declamatory poetry of Yevtushenko [Eshkun 2012]). Though this text is less dramatic than "Visions on a Hill" itself and geopolitically less assertive than the other amateur poems that were inspired by it, the author of these lines reproduces the catastrophic imagery of the original with the aim of maximally othering Rubtsov's 'cosmopolitan' enemies and solidifying the boundaries of his own imagined community.

Biographical Dramas

While scholars and other literary professionals leave no stone unturned in search of new biographical data, cultists and enthusiasts appear to be more circumspect in their engagement with Rubtsov's life, either fictionalizing it only cautiously, or criticizing other admirers for treating it too liberally. This circumspection does not so much stem from an awareness of one's lack of professionalism, as from the eagerness to prevent Rubtsov's life from being desecrated. To act as a guardian of everything that Rubtsov represents is a task to which many readers believe they can contribute.

Earlier I mentioned the hagiographic tendencies in Nikolai Koniaev's play *My Peaceful Native Land* which does introduce the viewer to Rubtsov's life and career, yet refrains from making the poet appear on stage. Yurii Kirienko-Maliugin, an engineer by training and a publishing poet since 1987, goes considerably further in two of his biographical dramas by making Rubtsov the lead character. "Nikolai Rubtsov's Star of the Fields" is a protracted monologue, delivered by Rubtsov himself, consisting of lines of verse and personal reflections offering three snapshots of his life in the 1960s (Kirienko-Maliugin 2005a). The considerably longer play "Nikolai Rubtsov" also consists of three scenes that

show the earliest stage of his career when he served in the Northern Fleet, his spell at the Literary Institute in Moscow and a historical picnic with Vologda writers just months before his death (Kirienko-Maliugin 2005b). In both plays Rubtsov comes across as quite vulnerable hitting the bottle and complaining about his loneliness, but this is stated rather than shown so as to de-emphasize the loutish behavior of which Rubtsov was known to be capable. Characteristically, in “Nikolai Rubtsov’s Star of the Fields” the hero disdainfully mentions that his far less talented colleagues are “living it up abroad,” while he is officially pronounced a parasite. This contrast between pampered rhymesters and a genius being subjected to public humiliation could not be starker, of course, calling to mind the mocking of Jesus Christ.

Given the number of historical poets and writers featuring in “Nikolai Rubtsov,” this more ambitious play reads almost as a who-is-who of the literary community of Vologda with the poets Boris Shishaev, Viktor Korotaev and village-prose writer Vasilii Belov making more than a fleeting appearance. While this may be a conscious choice on the part of the author to be as historically accurate as possible, it certainly enhances the impression that the literary community of Vologda is unanimous in its appreciation of Rubtsov’s talent and united in its aversion against his enemies, the overrated “urban verse mongers” (gorodskie rifmaplety).

Both plays contain clear allusions to Rubtsov’s fatal relationship with Liudmila Derbina (the “ginger one”), the woman whom Rubtsov fans hold responsible for his death, but her name is never mentioned.¹⁵

This conspicuous idolizing of Rubtsov’s life and work was abandoned only by Nikolai Rogozhin, a physician and director by training. In 2014 he shocked the Rubtsov community with a screenplay for a thirteen-part TV series that covered the poet’s entire life, including the violent scuffle that ended it. Although at this stage Rogozhin had no intention of sharing his screenplay with such a large audience, he had no option but to defend himself when Rubtsov specialist Leonid Veresov posted a personal letter from Rogozhin on the social media platform V Kontakte and included the link to the online version of the screenplay. Instead of replying to Rogozhin personally, who had only asked for his opinion on the screenplay, Veresov bluntly initiated a public debate in which he made his own position clear from the start: the screenplay painted a “scandalous” image of Rubtsov while the “spiritual power” of his poetry was never revealed¹⁶ (Discussion, August 4, 2014).

A superficial glance at the screenplay is sufficient to understand why a man like Veresov, author of five books and over fifty articles on Rubtsov, would arrive at such a grim verdict (Rogozhin 2014). We never see or hear Rubtsov read his own poetry and especially in the last episodes he behaves as a self-destructive troublemaker antagonizing even the best of his friends. While most of the offensive events in the series are historically accurate (including a brawl in the Central House of Writers that led to Rubtsov

spending the night in jail), in the eyes of the list members this favoring of scandal over poetry entirely discredited Rogozhin's project. Incited by Veresov's initial post, they urged Rogozhin to abandon his project on the grounds that he probably had the wrong nationality ("Are you really Russian?!") (Discussion, August 12, 2014), was spiritually ill-equipped to write about a "genius" such as Rubtsov and simply did not understand that his poetry was the "soul of the Russian people" (Discussion, August 8, 2014). One woman, a member of the club "Mrs. Provincial" (Gospozha Provintsia), which had opened its own "literary Rubtsov center" only a few years earlier, invited Rogozhin and his future film crew to Cherepovets to interview Rubtsov's surviving friends and acquaintances. Only by talking to people who had known Rubtsov personally could Rogozhin hope to paint a more balanced picture of the poet instead of the caricature-like drunk he had created in his screenplay (Discussion, August 8, 2014).

Apart from an unhealthy emphasis on the sordid aspects of Rubtsov's biography, according to the list members the screenplay contained other flaws such as the suggestion that the poet had considered emigrating to the West (an idea that Rubtsov actually rejects in the screenplay). Rubtsov could never have betrayed his fatherland in search of a better life abroad, the list members agreed, for he had always loved Russia and his *malaia rodina!* (Discussion, August 12, 2014) Finally, the list found fault with Rogozhin for painting too sympathetic a picture of Liudmila Derbina, Rubtsov's assumed killer. Writing in capitals to convey his anger one reader resorted to the popular parallel with George D'Antes and Nikolai Martynov (the killers of Pushkin and Lermontov respectively) to drive home his point: Derbina would never be rehabilitated, no matter how hard "THE EVTUSHENKOS AND THE LIBERAL CRITICS" were trying (Discussion, August 23, 2014).

When Rogozhin joined the discussion, none of the arguments he put forward in his own defense made the slightest impression. To maintain that he had written the screenplay because younger generations were already "forgetting" Rubtsov (Rogozhin to Veresov, Discussion, August 4, 2014), was ludicrous; the increasing number of monuments and Rubtsov festivals testified to the opposite! (Discussion, August 12, 2014) The argument that as a writer he was entitled to a certain amount of poetic license worked even less convincing; list members questioned his expertise and denied his good intentions. Consequently, when Rogozhin explained that he had wanted to create a "living" Rubtsov and not an icon (Discussion, August 16, 2014), one list member insisted that it would take another genius to write truthfully about the genius Rubtsov (Discussion, August 12, 2014). Considering that some of the discussants openly admitted not to have read the screenplay, it seems that the idea of a TV series must have looked suspicious in the first place; such an enterprise would inevitably "vulgarize" Rubtsov reducing him to the stature of a sport hero:

Scriptwriter, remember:

In front of you is a blank sheet!

Above you—the poet’s star!

A poet is not an ice-hockey player...¹⁷ (Discussion, August 14, 2014)

Interrupted by considerable intervals the discussion dragged on for over four years without either side giving in. Rogozhin never abandoned his project, as the list urged him to do, but so far he has not succeeded in raising the necessary money. Fans eager to see a fictionalized Rubtsov on the silver screen have to contend themselves with *Sea-buckthorn Summer* (Oblepikhovoe leto 2018), a biopic about playwright Alexander Vampilov that also features the “Messiah from Vologda,” albeit in various stages of inebriation.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the nexus between fan behavior, canon formation and the shaping of collective identities. Canon formation is the arena of critics, literary historians and teachers, ‘specialists’ invested with the authority to decide on the cultural significance of a literary text; fan behavior incorporates a variety of practices and rituals cultivated by media consumers (readers or viewers) who typically lack such generally accepted authority. Combining insights from fan studies with the audience continuum model as proposed by Abercrombie and Longhurst, I have examined the Rubtsov cult from the aspect of textual productivity and community building in order to demonstrate how a feeling of loss (over Rubtsov’s tragic death and, in quite a few cases, the breakup of the Soviet Union) has mobilized readers to take personal responsibility and protect his legacy.

Rubtsov fans are extremely sensitive when it comes to the exploitation of his life and work. Virtually the only acceptable way to use his poetry is by quoting it extensively; too much emphasis on the gritty details of his life is likely to provoke collective outrage, even if these details are sometimes also advanced as proof of Rubtsov’s ‘moral purity.’ Of particular importance to practically all fans is the pervasive suggestion of martyrdom permeating his popular memory. His violent death, legendary destitution, and public humiliation present the interlocking components of an overarching narrative that is often construed in religious (Christian) terms and lends itself for extrapolation to the fate of the Russian village and Russia as a whole. While many of these ideas were introduced by professional critics such as Bondarenko and Kostin in the 1990s, they are perpetuated and further developed by enthusiasts, cultists and petty producers (to use Abercrombie and Longhurst’s terminology), either by sharing their own work, or by censoring (or approving) that of others.

The determination with which readers tend to protect Rubtsov against any form of critical reassessment can hardly be called unique; this is what literary fandom is about. Yet as the discussion on Rogozhin's screenplay has shown, an attack on Rubtsov is often perceived as an assault on something much bigger: the dignity of the region or the entire Russian nation. This is probably where the main difference lies between the Rubtsov cult as it emerged in the 1990s and its current, more mainstream form which clearly taps into the self-assured rhetoric coming from the Kremlin since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. If in 2001 Vladimir Bondarenko could draw a parallel between Rubtsov's orphanhood and the uprootedness of Russia as a nation, we can now also detect a more defiant mood echoing the geopolitical obsessions of the country's leadership.

Rather than being perceived as a genius from the provinces who is consciously ignored by an urban elite (Konjaev), Rubtsov is now widely seen as a *national* poet who has long received the recognition he deserves. It is therefore only telling that an anthology of Rubtsov's verse was included in the so-called President's List, a reading list of hundred must-read titles compiled at the instigation of Vladimir Putin to restore Russia's waning reputation as the most reading country in the world ("Perechen' 100 knig" 2013). Whether this has really made Rubtsov's place in the canon of Russian poetry more secure in the long run remains to be seen, of course. Yet to the members of *Mrs. Provincial* and other Rubtsov organizations, the growing number of monuments, museums and poetry festivals shows that the community of 'like-minded people' who 'call each other by Rubtsov's name' is growing too.

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Footnotes

1 Among Western scholars, interest in Rubtsov’s poetry has been quite scant. Victor Terras’ *Handbook of Russian Literature* (1985) has a short entry on him and in 1987 Richard Freeborn published a long essay on Rubtsov in which he praises his poetry for its “melodious purity and luminosity,” but simultaneously warns the unprepared reader for the “artlessness and sentimentality” of his verse which can sometimes “seem to be almost self-parodying” (Freeborn 1987, 369). Writing in 2004, German translator Raymond Dittrich also called Rubtsov’s poetic style “simple, vivid with a tendency towards the melancholic,” stressing his indebtedness to such classics of Russian poetry as Tiutchev, Blok and Yesenin, particularly in terms of rhyme and meter (Dittrich 2004, 130). The uniqueness of Rubtsov’s work, according to Dittrich, resides in his predilection for “thick, dark colors,” which are “so characteristic of the Russian North.” (Dittrich 2004, 131) Rubtsov’s status in the Russian poetic canon is discussed by Katharine Hodgson and Alexandra Smith (2020). A fair number of Rubtsov’s poems has been translated into English (see the website <https://ruverses.com/>).

2 ZhSL—Zhizn’ zamechatel’nykh liudei (Life of Remarkable People) is a series of popular biographies founded by Florentii Pavlenkov in 1890 and rebooted by Maksim Gorky in 1933.

3 Because Koniaev’s diary has been published in *Sever* and then as a separate book edition, I will only refer to the entry dates, not the page numbers. This will make it easier to navigate the text.

4 I have not been able to establish whether Koniaev’s play was actually staged. According to his diary, the theater of Vologda did express an interest (7 April, 1989), but this news seems to have reached Koniaev only secondhand and he never returns to it.

5 In the Roman Catholic Church, a postulator is the person who officially oversees the process of canonization, including the documentation of the candidate-saint’s life and the hearing of witnesses; in Dovic and Helgason’s model of cultural sainthood postulators are those persons who are instrumental in establishing a writer’s canonical status.

6 From 1950 until 1952 Rubtsov studied at the college of forestry technology in Tot’ma from which he was excluded for his low performance.

All these cities and villages lay claim to some special bond with Rubtsov, either as the place where he was born (Yemetsk), spent part of his childhood (Nikol'skoe), served in the Northern Fleet (Murmansk), lived with his brother for a while (Novaia Dubrovka), or simply visited friends and relatives (Cherepovets).

8 Another example of a recent house museum would be Rubtsov House, a replica of the house in which Rubtsov's grandparents used to live, located 120 kilometers northeast of Vologda. Despite the fact that the relationship with Rubtsov himself is rather flimsy, the house derives its value just as much from its association with him, as from being a cultural heritage site in the more straightforward sense ("Novyi muzei, posviashchennyi Nikolaiu Rubtsovu, otkrylsia v sele Biriakovo Sokol'skogo raiona" 2022).

9 See the introduction in *Zvezda polei. Almanakh* (2009, 5).

10 As a typical example of these Rubtsov-inspired collections I refer to the almanac *Zvezda polei* (Star of the Fields) which was published by the Moscow-based Rubtsov Centre in 2009. In the preface the editor notes the existence of a "Rubtsov movement among poets" (poety rubtsovskogo napravleniia) that has emerged in the course of eight years of annual poetry competitions organized by the Rubtsov Centre (Kirienko-Maliugin 2009, 5).

11 The "stadium poets" usually stand for the most iconic poets of the Thaw, namely Yevgenii Yevtushenko, Bella Akhmadulina and Andrei Voznesenskii.

12 Not all websites dedicated to Nikolai Rubtsov offer the possibility of interactive engagement. Rubtsov-poetry.ru, for example, is an extremely rich and professional website, containing Rubtsov's entire oeuvre, the most dependable studies on his work, as well as numerous other sources, and yet visitors can only read these materials, not comment on them.

13 "Green flowers" is a symbol of the unattainable in Rubtsov's eponymous poem, published in 1969.

14 Rubtsov was killed early in the morning on January 19, 1971, on the day when, according to the Gregorian Calendar, the Baptism of Christ is celebrated (kreshchenie in Russian). Rubtsov's line "Ia umru v kreshchenskie morozy" (from the eponymous poem) has therefore often been explained as an accurate foretelling of his own death, although he may have used the expression without the Christian connotations, simply as meaning "I will die in the dead of winter." Nikolai Koniaev, amongst others, was convinced of Rubtsov's prophetic gift (28 January, 1996).

15 Kirienko-Maliugin allows himself considerably more freedom than Koniaev who hardly dared to go beyond what Rubtsov had written himself, but even in "Nikolai Rubtsov" and "Nikolai Rubtsov's Star of the Field" the biographical events are overshadowed by lengthy quotations from Rubtsov's poetry and songs based on his lyrics. The main function of this device (apart from highlighting Rubtsov's verse) is to elicit an enraptured response from the other characters, as for example, when Rubtsov quotes a few lines from "Visions on a Hill" and Vasilii Belov then praises it as one of the "truest things ever written about Russian history." In the final analysis, the play "Nikolai Rubtsov" is little more than a reading of Rubtsov's poetry interrupted by extensive outpourings of admiration and a settling of scores.

16 The need to preserve fan privacy often sits in contrast with the call for transparency (Dym and Fiesler 2020). In this case I have decided to anonymize my sources, especially considering that emotions were occasionally running

very high. Except for Leonid Veresov and Nikolai Rogozhin, I will simply use the reference “Discussion” and give the date a comment was posted (the link to the discussion list is provided in the bibliography). Identifying the exact sources should not be very difficult.

[17](#) The ice-hockey player reference is probably to Nikolai Lebedev’s film *Legend no. 17* (2012), a biopic on legendary ice-hockey player Valerii Kharlamov (1948–1981).