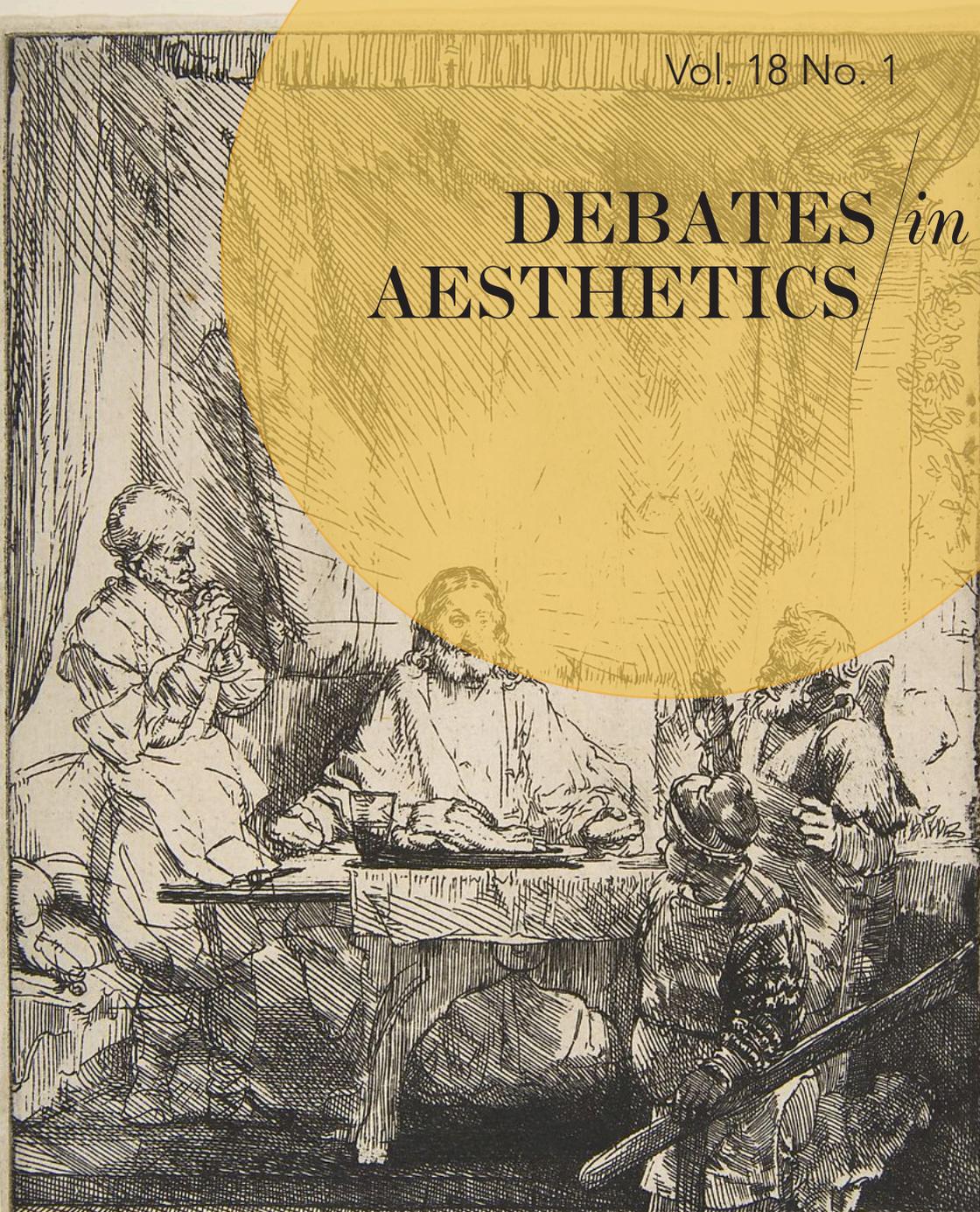


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TRUST, POETIC APPROPRIATION AND POETIC GHOSTS

AN INTERVIEW WITH RALPH WEBB

Rebecca Wallbank

In the autumn of 2021, I sat down over zoom to interview Ralf Webb, whose debut collection of poems *Rotten Days in Late Summer* was published by Penguin that year. It was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection and is a Telegraph and Irish Times Book of the Year. Webb's poems and critical writing have appeared in the London Review of Books, Test Centre, The Poetry Review and the Guardian. During 2020-21, he ran PoetryxClass, an Arts Council-funded reading group and seminar series and, in 2022, he will be a writer in residence at the Jan Michalski Foundation in Switzerland.

Rotten Days in Late Summer (2021) narrates a raw, complex and deeply personal account of youth, love, class, grief and death. The Guardian described the work as 'impressive... tender, unflinching' (Wilkinson 2021); Alex Dimitrov described it as 'direct and heart-breaking' (Webb 2021). I am neither a poet nor a poetry reviewer, but I found the collection strikingly honest, even brave. There are poems within this collection that resonated with me, educated me, and really moved me in a way that no other written work had for a long time. This is why I reached out to Webb for an interview. I wanted to know what his intentions are when writing, whether there is something specific that he wants the audience to feel or experience, whether he feels that there is something that the audience owes him, and whether there is something that he feels he owes the audience in turn. At the very least, it seems that, as audience members, we have a responsibility to do the work justice. This responsibility reflects and, indeed, hinges on the possibility of trust between poet and audience (Nguyen 2021). The nature and significance of such trust is one of the central themes of this interview. Within this interview, I also tied these themes to broader questions concerning artistic license, artistic creation and the concept of 'poetic appropriation' introduced by Anna Christina Ribeiro (2009).

I want to start with a two-part question. The first part: what is your intention when writing? Is the intention primarily to get the audience/reader to feel something? Is it to get them to believe something? Is it perhaps both of those things?

Alternatively [and this is the second part of the question], is your intention when writing less about the audience and more about you – less about what you hope the audience will experience and more about what you hope to gain as a writer. Is it more an opportunity for you to articulate something (in an almost cathartic manner) than it is an opportunity for an audience to hear something?

I'm focused on both the reader and myself, but to what degree depends from poem to poem. [In some ways, the question is hard to answer because I often think that the reader is myself].

I think the origin of my desire to write comes from a desire to communicate, but it's a very abstract, unformed, amorphous desire. It's not like I want to communicate to a particular group of people, or that I want to reach a particular set of people.

You asked about wanting to get people to believe something

or wanting to instil them with a particular affect. It's rarely that specific. There are some poems that I have written, which are more politically oriented; for sure, there is a desire to get the hypothetical reader thinking about things in a certain way, but it's not to get them to *believe* in something. The intention may be to get them to reconsider something that they might take for granted, but that is really on a poem by poem basis. I don't believe in the idea that poems are just arguments, statements of belief, or assertions of some particular set of values.

A lot of what you communicate with your poetry is very personal. Actually, a few of your poems made me cry. This actually happened to me whilst I was at the hairdressers. I had to stop reading and apologise to them. [laughs]

[Laughs] Well, that may be the best review I have ever had.

I wondered whether – because the poems are so personal – you ever feel that the wider reader owes you something: a specific kind of attentive stance or an interpretative duty?

And, I guess, there is a related wider question emerging here as well: is there a kind of

interpretative freedom that the readers are permitted, or is the meaning more fixed? Are we allowed, as readers, to bring ourselves (and our interpretations) to it, or is the reader's task more about 'getting it right'?

That's super interesting. The first part of your question was whether I feel the reader owes me anything. I don't think so; I don't think the reader owes me anything. I think there is a list of things I would want, hope or perhaps expect from the reader, but I don't think I'm owed anything by virtue of how *personal* some of the poems are or seem to be.

But, you know, that has been put to the test a little bit for me with this debut collection. I've had to encounter readers' real life opinions about my work, which actually exists in the world, and they're not universally complimentary. [Laughs] I've read a couple of unflattering things about the book online and I'm just like, 'but did you just... did you think about it properly?' It's interesting. In a way, I am expecting that if they spend longer with the book, then they'll think it's better.

So, what do I want from the reader? I guess, what I want from the reader is for them to approach the book, or the work, in good faith;

for them to approach the work on its own terms. As a reader, I think you should come to the work without prejudice, essentially, and treat it according to its own terms. So, if the reader came to the book and was hoping for poems about birds and got really annoyed that there were no poems about birds, then they wouldn't be treating it on its own terms. That's an extreme example but, hopefully, it illustrates my point!

Can you remind me what the second part of your question was?

Sure! So, a lot of your poems are quite personal and they reference things that you've experienced. I wondered whether there is still room for the reader to bring their own interpretation here.

Yeah, I think the answer is: absolutely. I feel creative writing as a whole (and probably all other art forms) is an inherently mysterious process. I can't explain what goes on between the brain and pen or keyboard, and I cannot always explain the origin of a particular poem. I can't even capture how much of it I'm in control of. It is inherently mysterious. So, regardless of how much you craft something

– for me – there should always be room for subjective interpretation.

Interesting, ok.

A good case in point: *Rotten Days in Late Summer* was recently reviewed in *The Poetry Review* (2021), and the reviewer picked up on a recurrent image throughout the book – that of mouths, open mouths – that I was completely unaware of and that even my editor was completely unaware of.

Ok. So, in your view, we can [as readers] bring something to the work, and there is some interpretative freedom – that is, the reader can ‘bring themselves to the poem’. Interesting. I wonder whether this is only permissible to a certain degree.

Let’s turn now to another somewhat related, strand of thought within the philosophy of poetry that I would like to hear your thoughts on. It argues that good poetry speaks to the audience; it generates in the reader the sense that they could have written it themselves, if only they had the talent to do so (Ribeiro 2009). The idea is that the words express something that we have felt or thought, or are on the cusp of feeling of thinking, but we just don’t know how to articulate it.

So, poetry is meant to reflect our experiences or emotions.

I’m raising this strand of thought because I wonder whether it is too much to say that such an experience is the mark of good poetry. I worry that it seems to encourage the external reader to use poetry for their own personal gain. I worry that it is a problematic attempt by the wider reader to take the poem for themselves and make it theirs when it is not; it’s the poet’s. The work is the poet’s own personal expression, and maybe we [those who are not the poet] should just appreciate it for what it is.

Perhaps, the matter depends on the particular piece. But surely not all poetry is good in virtue of its power to relate to our own experiences or make us ‘feel seen’.

One term that is used in this context is ‘poetic appropriation’. [To clarify, this is the idea that it is acceptable, even desirable, for the reader to appropriate the poet’s words and approach the poem in terms of how it bears on their own lives]. Poetic appropriation is described as a positive thing. I just wonder whether the term appropriation kind of already indicates that it is maybe something that we need to be cautious of.

[Laughs] Sorry, I realise that I’ve

asked a question, and then I've told you what I think about it! That couldn't have been more leading!

This reminds me of a quote, which I like using at any given opportunity, partly because I'm lazy, and partly because I think it's a really good quote. It is by poet Ilya Kaminsky, who had a book out called *Deaf Republic* (2019). The quote is: "a great poet is someone who is able to speak privately to many people at the same time" (Kaminsky, 2013). I kind of bastardised it recently into the idea that 'poetry is a private language shared', which sits adjacent to what you're saying. The idea being, that the poem is a medium able to articulate that which seems inarticulable. I think there is a lot to that idea.

That said, I think that there's no way of judging the 'success' of a poem, whether a poem is 'good' or 'bad' by this measure. Everyone thinks different things. Everyone has different opinions and different life experiences. There are some people for whom the poem will just *not connect* – you know – it won't *articulate* anything for them. I guess what I'm saying is that we should be wary of presuming there's an objective set of experiences, affects, or desires that cannot under normal circumstances,

be articulated, but that poetry is somehow uniquely able to express.

Okay. Yes, that makes sense. Maybe I can concede a little.

Well, no. Not at all. The term 'appropriate' is – I guess – quite a loaded one.

I think part of the worry here - which the term 'appropriation' brings out - is that there is a danger that the reader/audience member would just be taking on board the poet's experiences as their own, using the poem for their own personal benefit in a manner that fails to respect the poet and do justice to the poem.

I think you are right. There is some merit in a work of poetry being able to speak to people. I guess I wondered if there is a limit to which people can do that - whilst still respecting the very unique and personal thing that the poet has expressed.

Wow! That's a very interesting idea. I can definitely see how ethical limits could apply when you're looking at poems, whose subject matter lies at the intersections of race, class, gender and various kinds of marginalised, lived experiences. An example, I was trying to form in my head was like, if, say, a working class poet is talking about pretty extreme levels of pover-

ty in their poem and then a very wealthy reader is like: 'oh, that reminds me a lot of a bad afternoon I had when the fancy wine place ran out of my favourite bottle of £60 chardonnay'. Does that apply as an ethical limit? Does that make this person a 'bad' reader? It makes them a comical and ridiculous reader, but a 'bad' one? I'm not sure what I think about that. It opens up knotty questions to do with how or if you can quantify oppression and empathy.

Speaking generally, though, I don't know that there are any limits.

That's really interesting. So, I've asked you a little bit about whether we, as audience members, have duties to poets. However, do you, as a poet, ever feel you have a duty to the audience in turn?

So – as a bit of background – something that I'm particularly interested in is the concept of trust and the levels of trust between the artist and the audience. It's been claimed that the artist might often trust the audience that treats their work with a kind of interpretive and attentive justice (Nguyen 2021). Similarly, it has also been claimed that the audience might trust that the artist has created a work that is worth investing time in and is also 'authentic' in a certain sense (Ibid). The idea is that the

audience members trust that the poet hasn't simply sold out to the publisher's demand. And I guess I wondered if you felt any pressures or any duties of these kinds to an audience.

On a related note, I would also be interested in hearing your thoughts on what 'authenticity' might mean in this context. Your work is quite personal and reflective of your own experiences. Would you feel comfortable writing in a manner that's less reflective of your own experiences, perhaps more fictional? Is writing in a manner that is personal and reflective of experiences that have been lived by you part of what it is to be authentic? (Sorry, huge cluster of questions! [Laughs])

That's a huge question. The first part of your question is around audience trust and whether I feel that I owe the audience something. I don't know. I mean – in real terms – it can be quite difficult to create the conditions, within that setting, to form a proper connection with the audience to create something authentic or to create something 'real'. I think that's because in my experiences of those types of settings (I'm thinking of *real-life* readings, or on Zoom) are always quite vexed. People are coming to them with different sets of expectations and sometimes with vested

interests. And these expectations are all articulated by a set of social codes that some may feel alienated by, that some may be in a position to manipulate and exploit, that some may be actually in the process of creating – social codes which are very much to do with class.

But if we're talking in the abstract, like, you know, the *ideal* audience and the *ideal* reading situation and that kind of thing, I think, yes, my aim would be to deliver the work or orate the work in a way that can sustain some kind of affectual connection with the audience. I think it does require an element of trust in them, and they will have to have a certain amount of trust in me. Poetry readings are chaotic situations. Anything could happen; and anything does happen. Like, really *weird stuff* happens at poetry readings.

And do you think that poetry is particularly well-suited to talking about the personal?

I feel that poetry is such an exceptionally strange form, which I think has suffered for decades for not being demarcated into genres. One could demarcate different genres and sub-genres. There are competing sets of aesthetics, different philosophies around how language itself should be treated

within poetry – philosophies which are by turns metaphysical, scientific and political – and these can be based on inherited manifestos from tutors at universities; or from organic, historic evolutions within certain scenes, over years, and in response to completely varying canons and alternative canons and schools and cliques... So, it's all quite weird and complicated and there's a lot of tussling over how poetry 'should be'.

However, I think poetry is particularly well-suited for talking about the personal. And there's obviously a long lineage of it, going way back to Sappho or Catullus, and then tracing it forward to the Romantics, and then on through the twentieth century. There's a long lineage of relatively compressed expressions of personal experience.

But I don't think writing about one's personal experience is the same as writing auto-biographically or factually. I think there's a difference. I forget which poet said it – maybe it was Sharon Olds – who said that her poems are 'apparently personal', which I think is pretty accurate. I think you can be authentic and personal without being factual.

Oh, interesting. I hadn't thought about it like that before, but that

makes sense. I guess the poet (famously) has a licence to play with the facts and, perhaps – if I understand you correctly – by doing so, they can often create or express the thing that they are trying to say most clearly. That’s really interesting.

Ok, so I have one final set of questions. I wanted to ask you about your creative process; how you play around with different literary techniques and the decision-making process that you use to implement these techniques. Do you play around with degrees of opacity? I guess every decision you make is loaded, including all the decisions about the formal characteristics of the poem, such as spacing and where to place the lines on the page. You have large amounts of freedom, so how do you make those decisions, and what motivates them?

Poetry has – to borrow a phrase I used before – a kind of micro-architecture.

So, even the placement of commas or dashes – all of that – is contributing to the greater whole of the poem. Which is actually odd in a way, considering the aural/oral origins of the form. I guess, my decision-making process around the

poem’s micro-architecture is both oral and visual.

For me it is really a question of playing around endlessly, or almost obsessively, with line breaks, rearranging words, and setting new words next to each other. I find it very calming, and it is quite a mechanic process.

I was perhaps unduly influenced by a documentary I once saw about William Carlos Williams. There’s a scene about how he worked on a typewriter and how he was obsessed with the way it emulated machine work. That always stuck with me. There is this kind of machine-like quality to the constant rearranging and shifting and changing parts within the poem. This is where it often feels to me that ‘craft’ is involved, that poetry does involve the execution of a craft-based skillset that you could spend a whole lifetime honing.

In terms of being opaque and whether that is a choice, it definitely can be at times. The feeling that you want to make a particular passage sound a bit more mysterious, ha! I don’t know if that necessarily equates to good writing, but it does happen. John Ashbery once said something about the meaning of a piece of writing being a

frequency that you can tune into. I agree with that.

Would you say that the decisions you make are quite instinctive (even if you go back on them and change your mind)? I assume you are not following rules or a set standard; you just go on what looks or feels good.

Yeah. It is quite instinctive. But, there are – in the English language anyway – ghosts.

There are forms, which haunt any writing of poetry, particularly poetry that has a first person pronoun, such as the Sonnet. These ghosts can be useful. They can be ignored but not entirely exorcised.

When you are writing you are aware that there exist certain forms that can, if you want, be used very loosely. You can mess them up or work with them or against them. So, these forms become something like a leash; one that lets you roam around without getting lost.

Fascinating. So, how do you know when you are ready to finish writing? How do you know when you are done?

Yeah, that is a good question. I mean, everyone's process will be different, but there's a feeling I have where. I think a poem is

finished; where it kind of becomes inert to me. I've used the word 'ossified' before, where it kind of becomes static. So, it holds no charge for me any longer, and then I think it's done, which is not the same as saying that I think it's good. It's a feeling that I've either gone too far, and now it is dead, or just far enough, and there's nothing more I can give.

Reflections

One of the things that I found most striking about my interview with Webb is that he permits the audience to a higher level of interpretative freedom than I anticipated. In many ways, poetically-naïve audience members, such as myself, should be relieved as there is little pressure to get it right. Here, the meaning of the work is a 'frequency' which we are simply welcome to 'tap into'. The trust that Webb places in the audience primarily relates to an expectation that the audience will approach the work with the requisite level of attention and respect, and the correct interpretation of the work is somewhat secondary. There is something wonderfully liberating about this. However, how liberated are we exactly? And what are the philosophical implications of this freedom? In turning to the first of the above questions. I cannot help but wonder if there is a helpful comparison to be drawn between poetry and works of

scored music.¹ Performers of a work of scored music must meet a certain standard of correctness when interpreting the score if the performance is to count as a genuine performance of that work. But, some works of scored music have a notation which permits – and even encourages – a high level of interpretative freedom within the framework set out.² Such works contain fewer instructions and may even contain the instruction to improvise for a few bars. Other works are captured by a notation, which leaves the performer very little scope to play. I wonder if the audience members of a work of poetry are somewhat comparable to performers of a work of music, and the words on a page are somewhat comparable to notational scores. If so, it remains the case that there is a framework of interpretation that the audience of a work of poetry ought to respect in order to engage with that work genuinely, and the degree to which they have interpretative freedom may vary. I am not claiming that written poetry is a notational instruction nor that readers of poetry are performers.³ The claim is simply that a helpful comparison might be found here.

Another aspect of my interview with Webb, which I found particularly interesting, was his openness to poetic appropriation. We are welcome to bring

something of ourselves to his work. We are permitted – even encouraged – to let the work speak to our experiences and shape our understanding of what we have been through. In light of Webb's response, I have a greater understanding of Riberio's (2009) account of poetic value. Nevertheless, there is a part of me that wants to express caution. I still wonder if there is a limit to which audience members can permissibly appropriate the poem, particularly if what the poet has expressed is personal. I want to avoid a philosophical approach, which seeks to use the artist or their work for our own personal gain. In philosophy of art, we tend to ask: 'what can I learn from this artwork?', or 'what can I gain from it?'. However, an artwork is not always for us. It seems possible that some artworks are created primarily for the artist as a simple act of expression. When this happens, as audience members, we are lucky to gain access to the artist's expression. We are lucky that the artist trusts us, but the work is not ours to take.

1 See Wallbank (2020).

2 See Goodman (1986), Hamilton (2000).

3 For this kind of claim, see Kivy (2006).

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