

# **The Serpent Speaks**

a text by Tony Partridge for the exhibition

## **Ceramic Poem and the Mixing Bowl**

by Con Lynch, Sinéad Aldridge and Tony Partridge



In search of the serpent's rock - hand painted ceramic - diameter 31cm, height 9cm 2022 by Sinéad Aldridge and Con Lynch, photo by same.

## 1. The Serpent's Rock

*The Serpent's Rock lies in a gorge between two cliffs. It is black and undulating and almost brutal. It is completely alien to the other rocks that surround it. It is like a shadow that seems to come from the sea and embed itself in the earth, nuzzling in as if to hide itself away and sleep. But its back protrudes, sticking upwards. It is an alien and quite disturbing sight. It shuns the sun, it seems. The sea just touches against it, washing its farthest edge as it rises upwards before it then goes deep into the earth itself. It burrows in, in fact. Its scales are huge and its undulations rise upwards. But all the same, it is softer than all the other rocks around it. These other rocks seem to be spread back, pushed away to allow the serpent to dig in. To rest.*



The Serpent's Rock, photo by Tony Partridge

*Touch the serpent's back and it is calming to the hand. There is no resistance from it. No pulse. No shiver. It simply is.*

*But it certainly undulates, though there are creases in it too. There are fine lines across it, like wrinkles. Are these the wrinkles of age? This rock is very old. Does it hide a skeleton or muscle underneath its outer skin? Or is it only rock, a blessed rock, black and dour. When it dug itself in, it spread shards of other rocks about the place, especially where its head should be. Is the head deep beneath these rocks, hidden and inarticulate?*

*I see that it is separated from the rocks around it. It isn't itself of the cliff or of the earth. It is most definitely from another place and it has come here to hide or sleep. Has its sleep turned it darker than everything around it? I follow the serpent with my eyes until it drops into the sea. It doesn't extend itself outwards and farther into the sea. No, at the edge of the ocean it goes straight down, deep down within the earth. Or, looked at alternatively, it comes up from down there, up out of the earth, into view only to return again further inland – when it is away from the ocean. There it goes back into the earth. The Serpent's Rock lodges itself in the depths of the earth and it shows only its undulating back. All the rest is forgotten, lost, ineffable.*

*It exists despite us, who look at it and even scrape away a little bit of its skin. Its scales. The rock we scrape away becomes a black dust through grinding, this over months and months of grinding work.*



Black dust ground from the Serpent's Rock by Con Lynch

*Eventually, it is the colour of pitch, though at first it is a grey mixture. But as a glaze for the mixing-bowl it turns blacker than death. Burned by apple-wood, it seeks to find itself as a glaze. It is heated, again as it once was when it was hot, millions, maybe billions, of years ago. Its dust is initially chalky and grey, a powder burned eventually into a blackened goo. It is ready for the mixing-bowl. It is latent, and blatant and stark. It is wholly expressive of its frowning darkened look.*



Glaze for the Mixing Bowl by Con Lynch

## 2. The Serpent Speaks

*The Serpent's Rock has been silent for millions of years, but it has now decided to speak. Harken to its mouldy voice. It has something very old to say and its words are dense and difficult. These are words that should never be spoken and so I will use other words, words like the craftsman, the mixing-bowl, chaos, the young gods and souls, to describe what the serpent says. These words are only the rudiments of the serpent's speech.*

The craftsman builds souls out of existing material and then the souls create the cosmos through motion. Creation happens in a mixing-bowl. But before any of this, before all the other souls are created, there is the world soul which is built by the craftsman outside the mixing-bowl. The world soul is built first and then the other souls. This is the proper order of things. All the other souls are built in the mixing-bowl. Of these souls, the divine souls stay in the mixing-bowl after creation, but the mortal souls leave the bowl.

The mixing-bowl is the receptacle for Being, Becoming and Space. It is a medium that holds reflections like a mirror holds images. In fact, the mixing-bowl is the womb of space and it is space. Space is "known by a kind of bastard reasoning and is barely an object of belief."

*Oh my God, the serpent has just quoted Plato. Can he do that?*

The only thing permanent and unchanging in the mixing-bowl is the mixing-bowl itself. Inside the mixing-bowl there is flux and the mixing-bowl itself does not possess any of the qualities that appear in it. Such qualities pass in and out of the mixing-

bowl and the bowl partakes of those qualities in a mysterious and puzzling way.

The mixing-bowl takes hold of the hands of the craftsman and teases and forces these hands in a given and necessary direction. It seems as if the craftsman's hands are being dictated to by space. This is when the craftsman is the creator, the artificer, the imposer of order and the manufacturer. The craftsman organizes matter, but he creates by thinking. For the craftsman, the objects of thought are visible just like sense-objects are visible to human beings. We humans cannot think like this, our thinking is thinking in a completely different way.

The craftsman uses two longitudinal sections. These are straight lines into which he divides his compound, the ends of which he bends around to form two circles, the circle of the Same and the circle of Difference. In this way, the craftsman takes in hand the unity and diversity in the cosmos in order to fill up the nature of soul. He constructs souls out of these. He also uses rest and motion. But all the time he looks towards the eternal model, a paradigm. Using soul as his messenger he introduces the order of this paradigm into random disorder or chaos. He thereby generates the physical cosmos that we see and know.

Like constructs like and never unlike and so the craftsman constructs the divine and immaterial souls: the world soul, the divine souls and then the young gods. The divine souls and the young gods are immaterial but multiple. As multiples, the young gods construct mortal souls, which are also multiple. They also construct the physical world. But the craftsman also turns the attention of the souls towards himself so that he can show them the nature of the whole and the laws of fate, laws that have a necessity that is primeval. The craftsman shows the

souls that in constructing the cosmos he uses mathematics, geometry and harmonics, the uniting bonds that he uses to generate the cosmos.

Before the craftsman took the cosmos in hand, the cosmos was there in the form of chaos. It had a faulty and disorderly motion, the first stirrings of the physical world. But in these stirrings, there was an impulse to perfection though it was an incomplete impulse. That is why it was faulty and disorderly. It was incomplete until the craftsman introduced measure and proportion into its blindly surging chaos.

The craftsman mingles the elements of the souls. The much-celebrated mixing-bowl receives this mixture and it generates souls in conjunction with the craftsman. In other words, the craftsman constitutes the psychical essence in conjunction with the mixing-bowl and then the corporeal essence in conjunction with nature. The craftsman produces the intellect of the cosmos from his own essence. The mixing-bowl is the peculiar cause of souls and it is co-arranged with the craftsman and filled from him. The mixing-bowl receives from the craftsman the powers of prolific abundance and pours these on souls in accordance with the measures of their respective essences. The mixing-bowl is essentially vivific since souls are also lives, but it is the first effective cause of souls according to the peculiarity of essence. From the mixing-bowl, the soul of the cosmos subsists and likewise the other levels of souls below this. In fact, the whole order of the souls proceeds from the mixing-bowl and it is divided according to the prolific powers that the bowl contains. This is why the mixing-bowl is called the cause of souls. It is the receptacle of their fabrication and the generative monad of souls.



The mixing-bowl is said to be the fountain of souls, a fountain that is united to the craftsman and this fountain is the prolific cause of souls, but at a slight distance. The craftsman is the father of psychical generation. The mixing-bowl is the mother.

Limit and the Unlimited are common principles of mathematics, but they are also the fundamental principles of all beings. Limit expresses the character of boundedness or determinateness that belongs to every intelligible object. The Unlimited represents the fecundity of being, ever going beyond its own limits and developing into a world of derivatives which are other than itself but everywhere constrained by the unitary source from which they have proceeded. Limit and the Unlimited pervade all being, generating everything out of themselves. But these principles are derivatives of the still more eminent principle, the indescribable and utterly incomprehensible causation of the One. That which is mixed is intelligible essence. This subsists primarily from the One, which is the first god from whom Limit and the Unlimited are derived. But the mixed subsists secondarily from these two principles. The first principle, the One, was God who unfolds into light the two principles, Limit and the Unlimited. Then the fourth thing, after the One, Limit and the Unlimited, is the mixture.

The mixture is swirled by the craftsman, swirled circularly. There are two circulations, the circle of the Same and the circle of Difference. The craftsman's circulation of the same arranges and adorns the circulation of the different. These circles are the antecedently existing causes of similitude and dissimilitude in the order. The circles move, they swirl about the axis that extends right down through the poles of the cosmos. But that which is moved in a confused and disordered manner is

circularly led to order and bound by the craftsman's reasons, is assimilated to natures which always subsist with invariable sameness and permanency. But that which is in a certain sense Limited also has its dissolution, for that which is allotted a perpetual bond must also be said to be perpetually dissolved. For dissolution is conjoined with every bond.

The sun is the fabricator of all the senses because he is the author of seeing and of being seen. The sun gives subsistence to the essence of phantasy, so far as it is the same with sense. The sun, when he first appeared, astonished the mundane gods and all of them were desirous to dance around the sun and to be filled with his light.

### **3. The Serpent and the Artists**

*The serpent sees that nature creates icons of ideas - that are immaterial and intelligible - and it adorns the cosmos with imitations of them. It represents things that are indivisible in a manner that is divided, things that are eternal through what proceeds in time and things that are intelligible through those that are sensible. The serpent contrives images of the divine conveyed in words and imitates the superior power of paradigms by means of things that are more opposed and further removed from them.*

*That which is beyond nature gets indicated by means of things contrary to nature, that which is more divine than all reason gets indicated by things that are contrary to reason and that which is oversimplified beyond every possible kind of beauty gets indicated by means of things that are made to appear*

*obscene. That which is monstrous and contrary to nature motivates in a variety of ways towards the search for truth and it is a channel towards secret understanding.*



The serpent looks like “fingers on a hand which are simultaneously larger and smaller,” photo by Tony Partridge

*This channel that leads the soul to these things is like the sight of fingers on a hand which are simultaneously larger and smaller. A similar puzzlement with seemingly impossible appearances moves the soul to go beyond appearances towards reality and truth. Thus, one is not allowed to remain at the level of surface meaning because of its manifest implausibility. It is necessary to penetrate into the interior of myths – including the myth of the serpent himself -, to concern ourselves with the intellect of the creators of myth that has been invisibly concealed. These sorts of myths arouse in people the desire for meaning that is concealed within them and through their*

*apparent monstrosity to stimulate people to search for the truth that is established within the innermost sanctuaries. Yet they do not permit the profane to touch things which it is not lawful for them to touch.*

*The craftsman has established in himself the cause of all things, both good and bad, those better in the giving and those worse, those better fated equally with those that are obstacles to the activity of souls towards external things. He guides all things according to intellect, allotting appropriate things to each one and leading all things towards his own paternal care. It is by looking towards the Good, and for the sake of perfecting those who receive them, that the craftsman allots to souls both the things which belong to the better and those that belong to the inferior. The efflux of intellect is cunning and the emanation from self-control is licentious and the excess of courage is reckless. Everything is set in motion by the gods according to the agent's own suitability.*

*We ourselves can receive in a mystical manner the tradition of sacred lamentations and these are a symbol of providence which comes to us from higher beings. Our tears are tears for the race of suffering men and the gods grieve not because they are affected emotionally in the manner of humans but because there proceed from these gods a certain forethought and dispensation.*

*'The nymphs weep when there are no leaves on the oaks,  
and the nymphs rejoice again when rain makes the oaks  
flourish.'*

*However, at the same time, the separate operations of providence which is the gods exerting their influence into the*

*cosmos is called 'laughter.' One must define the laughter of the gods as their unstinting activity into the cosmos and the cause of the good order of encosmic things. Because such providence is unceasing and the sharing out of all good things by the gods is infinite, one must agree that it is appropriate to call the laughter of the gods 'unquenchable.' Do our human tears correspond with this laughter of the gods? It is a madness of the Muses that produces effects upon us and, if anyone arrives at the doors of art without madness then they have declared their work is incomplete.*

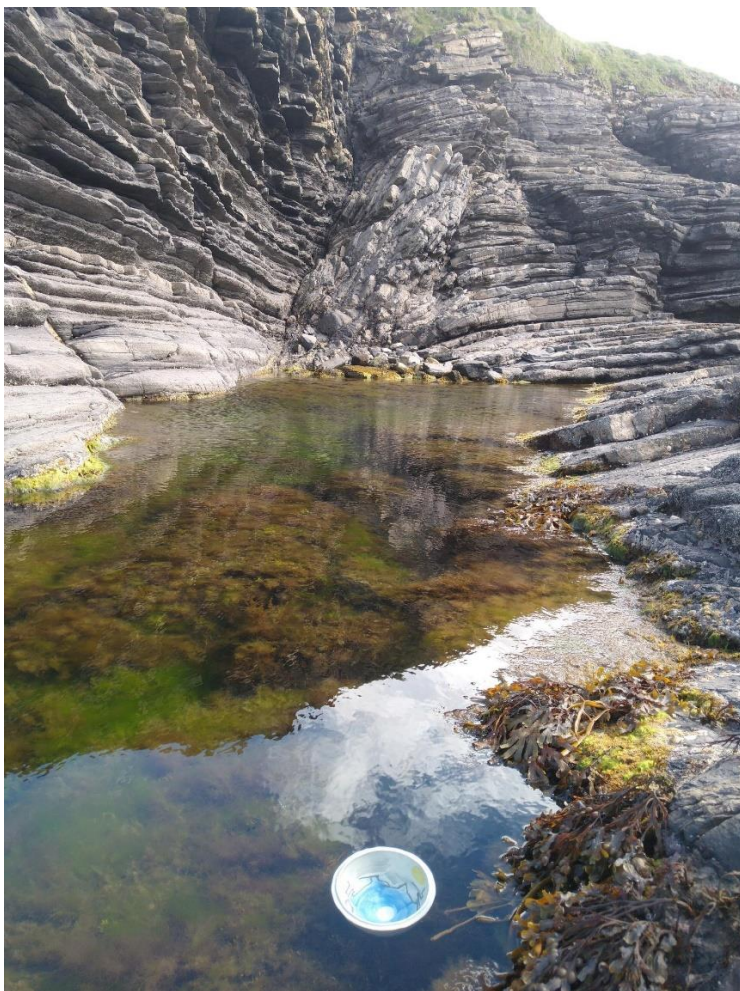
*True artists should create 'with raving mouth.' Their works are just one part of a token that is torn in half. It can be fitted back together again to establish that the party holding each half is who they claim to be. Then, the soul in its highest state calls forth from the gods a response whereby they extend their half of the token. This is the recipient's credential for divine checking. Now, life-bearing fire descends into material things through a channel. This also allows the soul to go back up the channel from which it is descended. Ritual action and sacred words help in this. Here there is a madness that is greater than self-control.*

*There are four forms of madness that are superior to sanity: prophecy, ritual, the inspiration of the Muses that produce art and inspired love. Such madness is, in fact, possession by the Muses and it is given to a gentle and innocent soul from above. Art is there to awaken the soul and rouse it to Bacchic madness, a madness that is a divinely inspired movement, an unwearying dance around the divine that brings to perfection those who are possessed.*

*In general, those who do something by skill are able to complete the same task in all similar cases. But those who are able to do*

*something by means of a divine power do not necessarily have a commensurate ability for other things. For an artist is a light thing and winged and sacred and is not able to create before they are divinely inspired and out of their mind.*

*The mixing-bowl is a symbol of the spring of souls and the libation is a symbol of the outflowing from there, which conducts a far greater life to the divided soul.*



Moon bowl 2- hand painted ceramic, diameter 20cm, height 9.5cm. by Sinéad Aldridge and Con Lynch, photo by Hugh Mc Sweeney

#### 4. Is the Serpent evil?

*I ask the serpent this question: Are you evil?*

The craftsman does not want evil to exist in the cosmos. He wants everything to be similar to himself, which is similar to the good. He wants this as far as it is possible. Yet there are many evils in the world and there is a multitude of determinate causes of evils. Human beings, for instance, are responsible for their choices and even souls are responsible for evils that they commit. Divine gods are good and, as good, they can only do good things. This means that they cannot be the cause of evil, they cannot be responsible for evil things, they cannot be the cause of everything that happens to human beings and they cannot be responsible for the world and especially for the evil things that happen in the world. The gods are only responsible for the good. But it turns out that there are many fewer good things than bad ones. And the bad things are caused by something other than the gods.

The cosmos comes into existence by a procession into creation from the One, but there is a part of the cosmos that reverts to the good. This is an essential part of its existence. Breathed out, it must be breathed in again. This is simply what happens. The One produces matter, which is just the lowest manifestation of unlimitedness. Matter is produced by the good and it is impossible of course that the good produces anything evil. Matter is produced by the good and is for the sake of the good. This means that matter cannot be evil and therefore the stone of the Serpent's Rock is not inherently evil.

*Is this the serpent's answer to my question? No, he goes further.*



Matter contributes to the generation of the world and, in this sense and to this extent, it is good. In fact, matter desires the good and is eager for it. Evil does not exist on its own in the way that matter does. Evil is outside of substance and evil itself is not substance. There is nothing that is contrary to substance. But good is contrary to evil. Evil, therefore, is never just a lesser good. If evil was a lesser good, then it could get stronger. In other words, as evil increases, it becomes less and less good. But evil isn't on the continuum of the good. It is actually in opposition to the good. Evil only exists in natures that are partial. Universal beings, especially gods, remain free of the corruption of evil. Then it is only intermittent participants in the good, in the soul and in the gods that can be partial beings and only partial beings can exhibit evil. When the higher beings create and produce beings, they do this because of their goodness. The production by these of lower beings does not imply evil in any way. Yet the cosmos would not be complete if it did not include lower beings. This is because the perfect cosmos requires gradations of perfection.

Evils occur and they occur in particular beings and these evils are relative because they come about in relation to some particular good. They feed off this good as parasites do. Evil can never exist in an absolute way. It cannot exist by itself. Evil is mixed in with the good. But evil can occur only in particular beings that sometimes fail to participate in the good. These are beings who exist in time and are able to change the form of their being. In the lower particular souls one can begin to see evil. These are souls who exist in time and who change the form of their being. Such souls are capable of ascending and descending and they are capable of acting not in accordance with their own nature. This means they are capable of choosing what is worse.

They have a weakness and this weakness is a lack of power. Particular bodies can also be corrupted, both in their essence and in fact.

This means that evil exists in three places: in the particular soul; in the image of the soul; and in the bodies of individual beings. There is a falling short of something that is better. In the case of the soul, the better principle is intellect. In irrational souls, it is reason. In the case of the body, it is nature. Evil is always due to the weakness of its recipients and it is due to their weakness that the recipients can be blamed for evil things.

Evil is therefore always parasitic on some kind of being or activity, which means that it is mixed with some form of good. Put another way, evil only exists as a side-effect of something good, something already existing, something that is true. To exist in its proper sense, all things, and all effects, must result from a cause as it proceeds towards a goal that is intended. Here, there is an essential relation between the cause and its effect. But whenever an effect is produced that was not intended, one that is not related properly to its cause, then it exists beside its proper effect. This is why it is parasitic. In the same sense that a failure is never directly intended by the agent pursuing a task, evil is never directly intended by its cause. It is a kind of dementia of proper causes. Evil can only exist parasitically upon the intended action. This is the case even when it is aimed at what seems good at first.

Evil is indeterminate, unordered and indefinite. It is never unqualifiedly evil. In other words, evil is never a complete privation. Somehow it exists with a good disposition or capacity, for it is from this good that evil is then a privation. Evil weakens this disposition. It draws its power from the good.

Evil does this through being interwoven with that nature, interwoven with the good. It is only via this method that evil establishes itself as something contrary to the good. Evil corrupts. It is its essential nature to be corrupting in the manner I have just described. But injustice, by increasing, does not come closer to the good. In other words, injustice is not a lesser good. It is the contrary of the good. Evil is nonetheless necessary despite its parasitic nature, and it is necessary because it exists because of the good.

Most souls are incapable of imitating the gods. These souls fall from on high, they toil and limp, they become weak and they suffer all sorts of evils. These souls are changed and twisted continuously by various choices and impulses. Their internal faculties are often hampered and curtailed. They become interwoven with the world and with other forms of life and being. This connection with all that is inferior, with oblivion and ignorance, is the origin of evil. There is no evil that is *per se* in nature. In fact, for any particular thing evil consists in the fact that it is not acting in accordance with nature.

The craftsman, as god, is the cause of all things, but this is not to say that he is the only cause of things. For the craftsman works in tandem with the mixing-bowl, and he uses a paradigm to create souls and the young gods. It is these who themselves create the cosmos that we see and touch. The craftsman works with Limit and the Unlimited and with their mixture. He also works with chaos. Where is the primal cause in all of this? In the One? You, who are listening to me now, you think that you know things already because you have knowledge and words. But are you truly listening to me? Can you even begin to hear my words?

Harken to me then: just as darkness cannot participate in light nor vice in virtue, so it is impossible that evil participate in the good. Good preserves each thing and all things have an appetite for the good. But privations never exist in their own right. Evil must needs feed upon the good. Now, all things are good and nothing is bad. Where is evil then? But evil nonetheless exists, this despite what I have just said. Evil is necessary and it exists for the things for which there is evil. Because these things exist and they exist in evil, then evil too must exist. Evil exists for the things that do not have a nature disposed to remain in the good in an unmixed way. The gods are the flowers and substantial lights of the good. They produce fine things and they produce intermediate things and whatever kinds of things there are. But like fire, they lack cold. Likewise, the gods lack evil. Their good is measure and light. In contrast, evil is darkness and the absence of measure. This is why evil corrupts. Everything acts according to its nature when there is no better action available. All things act in accordance with their rank, the place in the cosmos in which they have been placed in the accustomed manner and usually they preserve the boundaries they received from the gods.

You ask me whether I am evil? What is evil to you? Is it the continuous communion and cohabitation with what is inferior? Is it oblivion and ignorance which comes about by looking at that which is dark?

*May I ask then what is the true nature of the Serpent's Rock?*

The true nature of the Serpent's Rock is the ouroboros. This is its truest nature, its origin and the purest effect of its primal cause. It is its nature without privation, without evil. The ouroboros is a serpent eating its own tail and, as such, it is a

symbol for eternal cyclic renewal. It is the cycle of life, death and rebirth. Its snake's skin-sloughing symbolises the transmigration of souls. Some see it as a fertility symbol, where its tail is phallic and its mouth is a womb. It has been painted in many places: even in the tomb of Tutankhamun. There it represents the beginning and end of time. In ancient Greece too, where it is the One and the Many. There too it embraces cyclic systems: unity, multiplicity and the return to unity; evolution and involution; birth, growth, decrease, death. It is found among the Gnostics, the Manicheans and the Persians. In some places, its top half is black and its lower half is white, like in the Chinese *Yang-Yin* symbol. For the alchemists, it is human destiny. It occurs in Norse mythology. There it appears as the serpent Jörmungandr, who is one of the three children of Loki and Angrboda. It grew so large that it encircled the world and grasped its tail in with its teeth. In a Vedic text, called *Aitareya Brahmana*, it is a symbol of all things imbued with energy. It is then force, pure and simple. It is also the circle of flames that surrounds the dancing Shiva as he performs the cosmic dance.

In Ireland, where there is knowledge in the west, battle in the north, prosperity in the east and music in the south, there is also kingship in the centre, in the mysterious and mystical province of Mide. In Lough Derg, in County Donegal, there was once a cave where one could enter the Otherworld, the magical realm, and in the lake there was a magical beast, who was called the Caoránach. This was a hairy worm, formed from the thigh bone of an evil old crone, and it grew bigger and bigger and it then used to eat the cattle on the shore. This continued until Conan, a member of the Fianna, leapt into the monster's mouth and slit its throat, thus creating the red lake, Lough Dearg in Irish. But then there is also told the story of Corra, a goddess of snakes, and she calls forth the serpents of life, death and rebirth. These

serpents twine around the magic of eternity and also around the lives of ancestors. When she is transformed into a crane, Corra symbolises the transformation of bodies into spirit during their journey through the cycle of life. Then, when Christianity arrived in Ireland, St. Patrick is said to have chased Corra across the island and he battled with her at Lough Derg. Corra swallowed St. Patrick whole and the saint passed two days and two nights inside Corra's body. But he cut himself out and this kills Corra. The waters of Lough Derg turned red with her blood. Her body is turned into stone.

The ancient Greeks relate to us how the gods consume their own forefathers. They swallow them, just as worms and serpents do, and in this way they embrace all the powers of these forebears. The cosmic hierarchy unfolds through this swallowing and all this happens inside their bellies. But these gods can also swallow themselves. This is why the ouroboros is the primary symbol of eternal renewal and it is why it is the symbol of the cycle of life, death and rebirth.

I am the ouroboros. This is who and what I am.

## 5. The Artist Speaks

*The artist breathes like other humans but thinks differently, thinks in communion with something or someone other than they. But, and this is fortunate for us, the artist can speak to us in our own language, a human language, unlike the serpent who speaks in a language that is godlike and ineffable.*

There's always the right time of the work to reveal itself – my experience has taught me, if you have to force it, it's not ready, let the work dictate the time it has to be shown and all things converge. It is the knowledge of a work-method which one has built up over years. For instance: when to put aside something, leave it so you can contemplate the idea or beginnings of a possibility or when to distract yourself so that you don't overwork or ruin what's on the surface, or simply fooling yourself by juggling with snippets of ideas and keeping them all in the air at once. Or knowing when not to work. Being frightened of an idea, leaving it near at hand, so you can sneak up on it, pounce on it.

We artists have developed the most crazy systems to get work created. Describing the process only reduces it, as it's of absolutely no value to anyone until the thing is actually made, completed, done. You see we are always working and the stopping points are those moments when we've decided to rest and present some offerings to the gods.

I am set the task to think about my work in the context of landscape. It's proving interesting and difficult to pin down. Perhaps I have no land?



Con Lynch in the Workshop, photo by Tony Partridge



Con the Potter, photo by Tony Partridge





The entrance, or peephole, to Con's kiln, photo by Sinéad Aldridge



Con's kiln, photo by Sinéad Aldridge



Returning the bowls to the land, photo by Hugh Mc Sweeney



Landscape, photo by Sinéad Aldridge.

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The words in this pamphlet are just the beginnings of the serpent’s speech. The full text of its speaking will come later, and it too will be called “The Serpent Speaks.” But this second text will be much longer, a book that will seek to describe all that the serpent wants to say. It will be available at [www.tonypartridge.ie](http://www.tonypartridge.ie), in time.