

Bricks in a wall: a fragment of conversation on a creative journey...

'Can I just tell you a story?' ... John Berger, Roddy Doyle (et al et al et al)

Ah. So, you have caught me gazing out of my attic studio window again, up here amongst the swaying tree tops and the stoic chimney stacks and with only my jackdaws for company. They are cackling again and jumping in and out of the terra cotta in the middle of some dispute or other, and are a welcome distraction for when the '*work*' gets arduous. A friend once verbalised the implied *inverted commas* and *italics* of '*the work*' with raised eyes and eyebrows as though this was a *hobby*, like stamp-collecting; I put her straight on *that* one *very* quickly. Yes, when the work *gets arduous*. It's not physical work, but it's the mental hod-carrying and brick-laying of the act of *making* that is necessary to *creating*; the connecting of otherwise random lines, shapes, textures, forms and colours - and also words like these - into something half-coherent.

And I *have* done the physical bricking as well, but this is by far the more tiring as there is apparently no mental end to it; it just goes on and bloody on – like Alan Bennett's definition of the subject *History* in his admirable '*The History Boys*' ... "*History Sir? It's just one fucking thing after another...*" "*... Sir...*"... and with the final '*Sir*' - the '*Sir*' of *my* classroom memory - delivered as a casual impudent and essential '*pushing-at-the-boundaries*'- sneer of your typical Sixth Former in General Studies who has probably read a few books. Although it's a student sentiment I can also *well* relate to, having spent about seventy years in and out of classrooms of one kind or another myself, and at both ends of the process. I was either living and drowning amongst the chaos of it as a kid, or then later managing that heady swirling mix of teenage hormones, ebullience and humour - together with its testing-the-water abrasive sarcastic irony - on an hourly and daily basis in my several art rooms.

The educational treadmill of my early secondary school youth was measured and survived by counting; *one* bell, *one* lesson, *one* subject, *one* teacher, *one* event, *one* essay, and *one* book at a time, leading into another, and then into

another until that *final* bell rang and I cycled home. Backwards and forwards it went in what seemed at the time to be an endless dark-roomed *Kafka-esque* institution full of mental *Escher* spiral staircases going up and down to nowhere and ruled by black-gowned men, although at *that* time, I had no knowledge – and neither probably did those men - that either - writer and artist - existed. My grammar school mornings were always predicated by our assembled mumblings of... “...*forever and ever (Amen)*...” ... followed by ... “*Boys, you are dismissed*”... and off we’d onward march, supposedly *good Christian soldiers all* and *valiant-be pilgrims-each*, to the rousing and thumping piano-playing of our single-toothed and gnome-like music teacher, hunched over the ivories in our corner of the hall. He kept a slowly-dissolving Polo Mint spinning with his tongue on that tooth as he played, an endless source of fascination to us eleven-year-olds. ... ‘*Would it last the duration of the next hymn? Would he slip another in from under his gown, with his back turned to The Beak during one of our daily verbal strafings from the lectern?*’... And then out we strode in our grey and green-clad uniformed and uniform lines into yet *another* day of drudgery set within a *Piranesi* prison drawing (yet *another* artist unknown to me at the time) while wondering which dismissive definition of the word ‘*dismissed*’ the Beak was referring to on *that* particular day. The eventual discovery of those three – Piranesi, Escher and Kafka, along with many others – gave me hope; at least I wasn’t alone and could see that people had trodden and observed this path before. In fact, as we all found – those of us who felt trapped (and especially us in the ‘B’ stream) - that this was indeed a very *well*-trodden path, and that there *could* eventually be a way out of it for some of us. Mental tunnels were already being dug... *into* the Art Room in my case, rather than *under* the railings and *out* into Sandy Lane and the wider Chorlton by many of my compatriots.

It was a strange world, and those of us who have survived it and who are still in touch, later came to realise that *Pink Floyd* had written a song and made a film just for us and we hummed... ‘*We don’t need no educashun*’... to ourselves. And then the film ‘*It*’ later appeared during which we cheered-on the like-minded machine-gunning Sixth-Formers as they shot their own school buildings to pieces. Another one was ‘*The Graduate*’, after which we could never see our girlfriends’ mothers in quite the same way ever again. This was when we *finally* realised that there *had* indeed been many more people on *our*

side than we had *ever* known about at the time. We had just been very cleverly sorted and *divided* – me especially from all my friends at my primary school by the *11plus* - and then cynically *ruled* by what seemed to be those bitter men...

...And, just re-reading that, while these words on here do look *something* like bricks... "*Just another brick in the wall...*" ... as the song goes to the accompanying tramp-tramp-tramp-tramp of those marching children... *brick-laying* in itself does not even come *close* to describing *this* process of writing, or of drawing. *Dry-stone* walling however, at which I am now more practiced, better characterizes the creative activities of writing *and* of drawing, and of *making*. Bricks moulded into shape – like that stream of extruded school-uniformed human pink sausage meat so graphically illustrated in Pink Floyd's... '*The Wall*'... and then further developed, to our gasps of admiration, by Gerald Scarfe's acid-etched pen drawings – well, those bricks offer the *opportunity* for uniform and undeniable craftsmanship, but while listening to music or having a conversation, with your mind on other things. You can pick one up, bed it into your mortar and grab another, and then another and then another, like playing the same note on a piano, and going one note higher for each course topped, until you get to and turn at the long-awaited scaffold-structured corner, and there ahead stretches the rest of the day, in *another* raised key and into a *different* breeze or shadow or landscape, and then on into the next corner, and the next one, and the next one, one course at a time, until eventually there *will* be an end to it, the building roofed and the *outer* construction finally finished.

The particular four walls I am now remembering and mentally revisiting, belong to a house on the island of Alderney – a house, remarkably, still standing firm against the winter storms – and which when being worked on, offered a very different high view around *every* corner; a view usually accompanied by a *very* solid August Atlantic breeze followed by the sound of the distant crashing sea. I can remember the anticipation and excitement of each approaching change in the landscape, but not of the individual bricks that were enticing me toward them. Both – wind and waves – I imagined might have originated somewhere across the open sea in South America, while above me were skylarks beating the blue dome with their wings and songs, and over there... "*Just look, just over there, Mick. Can you see the gannets?...*"...where the white diving gannets are turning and falling headlong into the azure sea.

And over here, right by the hawthorn hedge which marks the edge of the will-be garden, stands one of Frank Carre's gentle Alderney cows munching amongst the bracken and yellow gorse, which smells – and has to me ever *since* then - of suntan cream and digestive biscuits. Imagination is *the* most wonderful thing when you take the time and space to use it; and it can *take* you *anywhere*... and with *anybody* who is residing there, in your memory...

Sorry. I have digressed again - I do a lot of this - this time strolling around on my Paradise Island, the bolt-hole - both mental and physical - which I discovered in my teenage youth with a couple of friends, with our tents, sleeping bags and kettle. We had intended to wash up somewhere else, like that message in a bottle, but that moment of serendipity upon which so many aspects of our lives can turn, took me there and has taken me back to that island – both virtually and in reality – regularly, ever since.

But back now to that *other* reality about which I am supposed to be writing; that dour dark cold mud-sucking hail-battered hill-top in a Cheshire landscape in the November of several years ago; back to the dry-stone walling, which is what this account is ultimately about. Of the two - the layering of brick or stone - it is the building with lumps of *gritstone* that is the more creative and subtle process, because it progresses in synergy *with* the bedrock *from* which it has emerged, and it is both *of* and *within* the landscape *across* which it is being worked.

And, like those... '*Thoughts, words, and deeds*'... of another half-remembered and mumbled chant from somewhere in the far-back far-distance of a school hall, no two stones are *exactly* the same. Just like thoughts and words, they sit together uniquely differently, harmonising or jarring and fitting into each other - or not - like the tumblers of a lock, or the words of a poem, or the lines in a drawing. Change those lines around and the structure of the drawing refocuses; change these words around and the meaning and the flow is altered; change the stones around and the wall behaves differently, change the thoughts around and the ideas that spring from their combining also change. And to take the analogy further, just as with a lock or an archway in the wall, use the wrong *key*-stone and nothing works properly. One of my jackdaws, the

elderly matriarch out there, finds this particularly interesting by the way - we have discussed this together on several occasions as she takes her bread - head cocked to one side as if posing me *another* question - from the edge of my roof window. You can read Ted Hughes' ...'*The Life and Times of Crow*'... with its accompanying black-crumbly-edged broken-charcoal drawings by Leonard Baskin, to understand all this. And there you are; that's *another* hour gone by as I have indeed just read *that* again, and just for the sheer *pleasure* of re-reading it. It's a slow and reflective occupation, this creative wall-building...

Where was I? Ah yes... but change *all* the bricks or breeze-blocks in a wall ... and well ... they look just like the *previously*-dropped ten-ton lorry-load to be turned into a few higher courses during that coming day. Only the *landscape* around my brick walls changed, and it was that which kept me going...

My colleague Rob who-became-a-friend, is a craftsman stone-waller. *His* expertise is such that he can work rapidly, head down as he chooses each piece in the pile to his side, and does-so at *least* two moves ahead of the last one; and then he handles the chosen stone only *once* before placing it, again, only *once*, before the next one is picked up, and all this is achieved, to my mind, in one graceful and articulate movement. When he sees this he will think I am '*bloody daft*' for saying that. But each stone affords him an *opportunity* and does not cause a problem, like the snooker player who is always looking beyond *this* move and on into the next two or three by *using* the coloured balls to advantage; or like a chess player. Or like an artist, or a writer or a musician, whose minds are *already* on the *next* line or *next* note, or the next word, the *next* shape, the *next* form or chord, while they are delivering *this* one up to their would-be audience.

Personally of those last three, I am primarily the first kind of practitioner, and one who has often been introduced to the group in front of me as ...'*This is the artist working with you today everybody*'... although to me *that* word '*artist*' means people like Rembrandt and Picasso. I have often involuntarily glanced over my shoulder at *that* point in the introduction to see, as if by some miracle, they have indeed just walked through the door behind to help me out. However, it has *never* happened quite like that; except of course in that their

considerable assistance and expertise has *always* remained *within my head*, if never actually physically by my side; help which is always readily and *generously* offered – and accepted - when needed.

But I did also *dabble* in the music many decades ago in the pubs and clubs of Stockport, Salford, and Newcastle, together with several other places, and usually sitting-in amongst far better musicians than I would *ever* be. And while some of them today can certainly be described as being '*famous*', I was only really a *session* blues harmonica player, although my friends do tell me that I did apparently have *my moments* when the likes of *Little Walter, Cyril Davies, John Mayall* and *Sonny Terry et al* strode into my head, grabbed the mic, and took me over. I was lost in a trance of a loud and enveloping twelve-bar blues anyway, and I can't remember, so you'll have to take *their* word for that.

So, Rob is a craftsman who once – somewhat reluctantly at first - agreed to join me on a creative journey, and in so doing, briefly became what my art books would call '*a sculptor*', this when he moved nervously on from his own well-trodden ground of netting our rising Macclesfield hills under the complex web of his gritstone walls, a net which appears to be holding them down, captured, as they ocean-swell across the contours of the white snow-covered *Moby Dick* backs of the hills rising up from the eastern edge of our town. They undulate up and over our distant horizons towards our sunrise, one wave-crest after another, and are viewed in the rectangles between the old silk-weavers' cottages and mills at the dawn-ends of Macclesfield's gritstone-paved terraced streets, there to join up with all the *other* walls made by all the other people, just like Rob – their work unsigned – traversing all the miles and across all the centuries.

These are his *physical* line drawings, running over both summer grass and winter snow alike, and they will last for generations. The walls are seen and casually commented upon by thousands of people; all those passers-by who will never *knowingly* meet their builders, such is their, and *his*, quiet self-contained and unassuming working presence, and neither will they ever feel the need to know his name. The work is enough. It doesn't need a plaque or gallery explanation next to it in order to better understand it.

On that first occasion that we, Rob and I, first joined our forces and skills, his was a transition into this rather *less-secure* area of activity that is my daily bread, and involved interpreting the bits of scribble that were the annotated drawings of my *visions-made-visible* scrawling across the grubby pages of my notebooks; those smudges of graphite made while walking this landscape with the embryo of an *idea*; the charcoal marks, the annotated ball-pen lines, together with smears of mud added here-and-there, both by accident and for the casual gravitas of *arty-farty* good-measure. In agreeing to this undertaking, Rob was taken out of *his* world that is the *certainty* of craftsmanship to join me in *my* world that is the *uncertainty* of creativity; that world wherein lies the interpretation of thoughts and ideas and which, as-night-follows-day, plunges one into the realm of inevitable *public* critical opinion, be it praise, indifference, or ridicule. So this *thing* which is called *art* - as I discovered as a child - is a risky undertaking, even for the experienced and the thick-skinned. But for the unprepared like Rob? Well, I have seen both small children and grown adults, all with huge creative potential, be utterly *demolished* by one thoughtless and caustic throw-away comment from someone whose stock-exercise is usually *ignorance*, and who verbalises it loud and clear, and often with something like... "*Oh, but I don't know ANYTHING about art, and I can't draw either...*"... Of course not. ...*So do shut up...*

And that's the real *cliff-edge* stuff of personal creativity: that act of peering towards the so-called sunlit uplands (*ha ha*) of the desperately-needed approval that is shimmering over there in the distance, whilst simultaneously staring down into the intervening deep-dark pit at your feet; the pit that is the yawning abyss of writhing opinionated and narrow-minded *disapproval* into which you can so easily tumble if you go too near the edge. Or worse, if you *let them* push you in. And of course, as Rob admits, a craft-built stone wall is nothing like this; it is just what it is; it's *a wall*, and nothing more, and nothing less; it either *works* or it doesn't. The sheep either cross its boundary line or they don't; either they are contained by it, or they are not.

Building such a sculptural structure – or even merely exhibiting a drawing of it - is always an emotional risk. It's like embarking upon that one-time first love affair of my early-twenties-youth when, willingly opened up as I then was like a box of chocolates, I was anxious that my contents and *soft-centre* might not

quite match the colourful pictures I had painted of and for myself on the outside of the lid of my protective box.

And 'Art' reveals itself *just* at that point where the *relationship* between our inner-most sensitivities and the *anxious* sides of our personality collide with, and are necessarily and mercilessly exposed to, that *one* other person who is looking *in*; or to those *crowds* of people standing in a gallery in front of the results of your painfully *few* developing strengths which are standing nervously shoulder-to-shoulder alongside your *many* and obvious well-defined and exposed weaknesses; an occasion where you are *hoping* for that pat on the back of approval, while *bracing yourself* for the punch in the face of rejection. And I know from my school how deep *that* feeling runs. With me it was like a seam of gold. It stayed deep within my underground bedrock, hidden behind that drip-drip-drip in the moss and ferns, until I began to pick and scrape at it in that other paradise called the *Art Room* with my teacher Bert Roberts, and then, encouraged, I exposed it bit by gleaming *reluctant* bit out into the blinking daylight, onto a sheet of paper, or onto a page, or into a frame, or from a lump of clay or plaster.... or even onto a Macclesfield hillside.....





*Sedimentary gritstone bedrock, Kerridge Quarry, Bollington, Cheshire...
exposed to light and air probably for the first time in 300 million years, and
from which our source material for 'Folded Walls' emerged.*





Below: the landscape towards Hardingland and Macclesfield Forest, the inspiration and starting point for this piece of sculpture.



Sculpture can be a mucky cold wet business...



*Above: 'Folded Walls and Hills'. Tegg's Nose Country Park,
Macclesfield.*

Jeff Teasdale and Rob Sharpley