

Lawrence Cleary: OK Folks, Well, welcome. I'm sure, I guess you may have been to one of these in the past, because you are at the University. This is the first time that – this is called *How I Write Ireland*, and this is a series of interviews we do with authors, em, not always with academic authors, sometimes with creative writers as well. And Tim is actually the second creative writer that we've interviewed. Em, my first interview was with Jo Slade, and all these interviews will be filmed and transcribed and put up on to the Writing Centre website at the University.

Em, so *How I Write, Ireland* is a free public event, where valued writers answer questions not only about what they write, but about how they write it, how they go about it, and, eh, so that's what we're here for today. Em, let me see, I guess, as far as just introducing Tim here, Tim Cunningham was born in Limerick in 1942 and educated at Limerick CBS – I haven't found out what CBS stands for?

Tim Cunningham: Christian Brothers School.

Lawrence: I thought it was the Central Broadcasting System [laughter]. Christian Brothers School and, eh, Birbeck College in London

Tim: Yes. It's part of London University.

Lawrence: And how old were you when you went there?

Late twenties, early thirties.

Lawrence: Oh, OK, and he currently resides in Essex, UK. Did you say you were from Limerick?

Tim: Limerick, yes.

Lawrence: OK. His first collection, *Don Marcelino's Daughter*, was published by Peterloo Poets in 2001, and reprinted in 2002 and 2004. His second collection *Unequal Thirds*, was published in 2006, again by Peterloo. *Kyrie* in 2008, his third collection, is firmly rooted in 1950s Ireland, and then *Siege*, his latest collection, the one that he is here to introduce, is a celebration of life and an intimate peon to where particular lives and particular times were where he lived here.

Tim: It's largely taken from the first three . . .

Lawrence: Yeah.

Tim: . . . with a sprinkling of new stuff. The poems are all supposed to be universal, obviously, but still there's a very vague, definite centre and core there, of the people and so on. So I took all the Limerick poems from previous collections, and put them all together that way. Partly because I'm coming to my seventieth birthday . . .

Lawrence: Yes, I wanted to say that.

Tim: . . . it's a seventieth birthday present to myself. Thank you Dominic!

Lawrence: Oh, this is Dominic. I didn't recognise you, because, actually I see your picture on the website, but I didn't . . .

Dominic Taylor: I'm better looking . . .

Lawrence: You are. It's amazing. It's brilliant. So, I did want to say that Tim is here to simultaneously celebrate his seventieth birthday and launch his new book of poetry, *Siege*. OK. Em, I met Tim through Cynthia Gannet and John Brerton, and you have some experience of them from Massachusetts, you used to live in Massachusetts.

Tim: No, I didn't.

Lawrence: Did you not?

Tim: No. I met them when you were there because, through Richard, Richard Halpin.

Lawrence: Oh, that's right.

Tim: Because Richard is a friend of John's and you are a friend of Cynthia's?

Lawrence: Yes.

Tim: And they are good friends.

Lawrence: We are all connected through the Writing Centres in the United States and the Writing Centre in Ireland, so these are academics in the United States who were at the same poetry reading. They actually told me . . .

Tim: At the Locke Bar.

Lawrence: Yes, the Locke Bar. That was in 2011.

Audience member: Where is that Writing Centre located?

Lawrence: We are in the Main Building.

Audience member: No, the one in the US?

Lawrence: Oh, there's lots of writing centres in the US. Most universities would have a writing centre. She was at university in New Hampshire. John is in the Athenaeum, which is actually not really a university. It's kind of, it's almost like a

museum. It's more like this, actually. It has some old texts and things like that. So that's where John is. Em, I want to – we don't normally do this but, em – Tim asked if he could read a few poems before we get started and I want to allow him to do that. So he's going to read a few poems from his new book *Siege*.

Tim: I'll just read three to give a bit of a flavour of what I do and the first one is called *His Letter*. It's a personal one. My father was killed in the Second World War. He was killed, and he died in Italy in 1944. Sorry, or was it . . . it was before I was born. I was born in 1942, and he died before that, so I don't remember him at all. But he was writing letters throughout the campaign to my mother and then he was caught when a grenade went off, and of course the last letter he wrote before this happened, it was so urgent it was written in pencil. [Inaudible]

And the second one is called *Mission Week*. Limerick had this wonderful religious - religion was important in Ireland - it had an arch confraternity, probably the biggest arch confraternity in the world, and two Redemptorists would come along every year giving a mission, the good guy and the bad guy. Eh, then you have *The Bridge, The Castle and The Falls*. Just outside, you can see them from the wall, you have a perfect view, and so that's about place. So they're three different aspects really, so that will give you a little flavour.

His Letter

*Opening the letter,
Words flew up like butterflies,
Exploded with rainbow wings.*

*I part the yellowing pages now,
Brittle as fallen leaves;
Unbandage the past.*

He writes of where he is:

*Of guard duty tinselled with frost,
And stars like sixpences
Reflecting on his bayonet.*

Remembers where he was:

*His mother's fingers sculpting flour,
His father's feet and his
Welcome through acres of neighbouring fields.*

Dreams of where he longs to be:

*Alighting from the troop train
Seeing his Venus's green coat*

Appearing from a cloud of steam.

*And, knowing the pencil's lead would sink
In the page's white rapids
He asks her to rewrite his words in pen.*

*Then the poem's
Pencil-sketch of love,
Of life disappearing
Like wrens into a bush.*

*I read his testament,
Follow the vowel and consonantal
Roads we might have walked.*

*But mostly I watch her hand,
Observe it tracing faithfully
The loop and line of letters;*

*Her pen climbing his wordscape
Its warm ink, intimate on pencil
Like skin on skin.*

And, em, **Mission Week**

There's a huge emotional transition, obviously, em, two Redemptorists . . . we used to have the Duffy's circus who used to also come round once a year. So it begins with . . .

*They turned up once a year like Duffy's
Circus, the two Redemptorists:
One with blowlamp tongue stripping
Paint from the city's peeling soul.*

*The other's brushes dipped in tins
Of beatific light. Keen
As Pentecostal wind, they stormed
The pulpit steps in black birettas*

*And soutanes, rosaries dangling
From their belts like rope ladders
To heaven. One stoked embers of fear,
Made words glow like burning coals*

*Indelibly searing his picture
Of hell and fanning its flames*

*With eternity's huge bellows.
The other squeezed words to diamonds:*

*Jewels in the Virgin's tiara
A celestial treasure hoard.
Their leaving was the folding of tents
Amen to trapeze, strong man,*

*The chair and whip in the Daniel cage.
Back then to the tip-toe, soot-soft
Words of the curate at St. Michael's:
His index finger writing on sand*

*The secrets of heaven and hell,
His passport stamped at both borders.*

That was a man called Fr Pat Lyons. A lovely man. He died very young.

And the last one in the book, ***The Bridge, The Castle and The Falls*** . . . visual aid . . .
when I was a kid a remember I would see that so often, with my grandfather . . .

*How best to frame my picture
Of the bridge, the castle and the falls:*

*Thomond Bridge, its seven arches
Scissoring the Shannon and, beyond,
The heat haze shimmering
On Clare's blaize hills,*

*King John's Castle, its walls
Still pocked with canon-shot*

*Its arrowslits still proffering
A narrow view of history,*

*The Curragower Falls, our local
And discrete Niagara,
Their surge and swirls unveiled
Twice daily at low tide?*

*Younger, I would take the wider view,
Raid the textbooks' pages*

*And choose somewhere between
The splash of Viking oars
And the Wild Geese jetstream*

Off to fight King Louis' wars.

*Now that history is intimate
And I reel in the salmon-silver years,*

*Perhaps I will return to that first
Picture – creation's oils still wet –
Perched on the crow's nest
Of my grandfather's broad shoulders.*

[Applause]

Lawrence: That's brilliant. I should mention . . . I just want to reiterate, that you're launching this book on Sunday, no Saturday, at 4 o'clock.

Tim: In the Belltable.

Lawrence: In the Belltable Arts Centre, so . . . are you going to read there as well?

Tim: I'm allowed ten minutes, I believe, yes.

Lawrence: OK. Cool. So three different ones?

Tim: Andy Warhol says we all have fifteen minutes of fame, Dominic is allowing me ten minutes.

[Laughter]

Lawrence: That's sweet of him. I love it. It was worth the trip! Well this is great. I wonder if we could get started. I just want to let people know who aren't familiar with this, the procedure is basically this: what I do is I talk to Tim about his process, like, what he does when he writes, because there is a lot of things that people wonder about, like how do people write poems, how do people write short stories, how do people write long essays, how do they do these things? How do they write newspaper articles and so on. It's not so much in terms of their topic, although sometimes it's related, it's in terms of their process, like what they do. How do they . . . you've written three books, or is it four?

Tim: Four.

Lawrence: Four books. So you did say to me on the phone that your output has increased by a bit since you retired, is that right?

Tim: Well I retired some years back, so I have time.

Lawrence: Yes.

Tim: How much it has increased by is a different story because when you have time, you're inclined to give yourself more time . . .

Lawrence: Yes.

Tim: . . . [inaudible] because that reflects a process also, doesn't it?

Lawrence: Did you publish books of poetry before you retired? Are any of those books . . .

Tim: I was just about to retire from teaching and I got my, the acceptance for my first book that same month. I was retiring at the end of July. I got it that month. But the book wasn't going to come out for another five years. So that gave me a chance to scribble a few things before it came out, yes.

Lawrence: Sure, yes. So you had to work on it before then.

Tim: A lot of the time I was working hectically. Also I was a student, a part-time student, I was doing a full-time job, I was writing at night, and all this kind of stuff. So very, very different paces at different times and so on. Yes. But none of that matters. Absolutely none of that matters. What matters is you end up at a quit point or don't you. That's all that matters.

Lawrence: I mean there's a process aspect that kind of matters, in the sense that some people who publish a lot, and you've published quite a bit so far, and I assume there'll be more to come, and, em, the fact is that you did do something right, and so I guess a lot of people who haven't published will be wondering, what did he do, how did he do it? And you said before you retired you had written, you had composed poetry [inaudible]. But what was the routine? Did you wake up in the morning – you said you wrote at night – so like, what were you doing, coming home from work and . . . ?

Tim: Well, when I was working I was doing lots of other things besides teaching. I remember when I was working in Cornwall I went to a few places, and in the mornings, something might cross your mind and you'd [inaudible]. Lunch breaks, you were having your lunch and if you felt like it, it would depend on what was happening, and especially if something was going through your head, you'd say, well I have half an hour now, I can do it. And then you'd come back at night, when you're supposed to be doing the work and studies and all that, and you'd say, well I have to do this, because it mightn't be there tomorrow. Of course when I was teaching the routine was different. I was close to work . . . One of the particulars with me was (everyone is different of course) because of the pressure of time, I would actually have, you know, sheets of paper beside me going to bed at night, if I woke up, in case I'd get a chance to jot it down.

Lawrence: Sure.

Tim: I don't do that now. I can afford to write during the day and just relax, or whatever.

Lawrence: So that's how things change?

Tim: Yes, very, very much so.

Lawrence: So do you write in the mornings now? Do you write in the afternoons, or do you have a set time when you write?

Tim: My routine, I have a very well, very, very carefully structured routine and I'm very very hard. I leave the house at twenty past eleven in the morning and go for a walk to the pub. And I do a lot of it there. I have lunch there, and I scribble while I'm there, quite a bit. I go to the library, and I write at home and write at nights or whatever. Yes. But a lot of it, actually, during the day. I have the luxury of not having to scribe things then at night. Also, if you're writing poetry, it's a different discipline from writing a novel. If you're writing a novel you can be disciplined. You can say, I've got to turn out so many words, and that's it. Make your fingers dance on the keys.

Lawrence: Right.

Tim: But with poetry it's more like fishing. It doesn't work like that. No, no. No. I'm not catching today. I'll give it a [inaudible].

Lawrence: You know these are the kinds of questions that I want to ask Tim, and I'm going to ask him for another 20 – 25 minutes, or maybe 20 minutes, and then I'm gonna open it up for you to ask him questions. And I want to stress that what we try to do . . . is try to, I would like you to think about when you write. When you write, what kinds of difficulties do you run into, eh, is it coming up with ideas, is it trying to figure out how to overcome writer's block, em, is it, em, possibly how to establish a routine, em, is it how to research your writing? In other words, like, if you have a certain topic, like let's say Limerick or something like that, is your, kind of like, muse or your point of inspiration, or something like that. Do you research it, do you not research it, do you just draw from experience, those kinds of things. So, as we're talking I'm hoping you're gonna think about some questions that you might have that would help you, maybe Tim can help you to become a better writer by giving you some tips on how he has become a better writer. And that's the idea behind the interviews.

Also, if you want to imagine me writing you can visualise me in a little restaurant, having a cup of tea and some little snack or whatever, with a sheet of paper.

Lawrence: OK. I want to follow up on this though, because it's really interesting, because I like to work in noisy cafés. For me, it's the most productive time for me. Actually, if I cannot hear what people are saying, I'm very productive. If I hear conversations it's really hard for me to concentrate. Is that a similar situation?

Tim: Yes, provided it's not artificial noise.

Lawrence: Right.

Tim: I leave the house every day. One reason I leave the house every day, when I retired early on, someone is always going to start mowing the lawn when I'm writing, or drilling, or banging on the wall, or putting a nail in, putting up bookshelves. There's always something, disembowelling trees or whatever, but em, and I go away, and I can work, as I say, I can work like that, and I can chat to people, and I can read a bit of the paper and see how Man United are doing. You know, I can do that, and there's no problem whatsoever, and then, just when you need it, boom, absolutely you're there. Despite what is going on around you. And it's lovely, it's such a luxury. You can thank my wife. I say my wife. Between my wife and Dominic, this is all their work. I just wrote the poems. They did all the work.

Lawrence: Right. They made it possible.

Tim: Oh, they did all the work. She does all the typing and absolutely everything. And she and Dominic are brilliant, and so on, yes. So, I just wrote the poems. The rest is all their work.

Lawrence: That's brilliant. OK. I know that earlier we were talking and you, we were kind of discussing this idea of like people saying, where do you get your ideas from, and how that's a really impossible question to answer. And I was hoping to maybe talk a little bit about that. In the writing centre at UL, when we are talking about writing, and it doesn't have to be academic writing, it can be any kind of writing, and one of the things we try to do is we try to frame it in terms of this process, and so there's this point where you think you can write a poem, and there's this point where you're writing about something, you're writing your poem, and there's this point where you're honing it, you're perfecting it, you're getting it to where you want it to be.

Tim: Well I like the word perfecting. Yeats said there's something to perfect and [inaudible]. They say about poetry, you don't ever finish a poem . . .

Lawrence: You have the ability, yes, because otherwise you are tinkering with it forever. Yes.

Tim: It's like Wordsworth, brilliant poems, wasted so much of his life going back and messing them up by revising them.

Lawrence: Yes, exactly. And you were, we were actually talking about Donal. And Donal, you're actually Sheehan?

Donal Ó Siodhacháin: Ó Siodhacháin.

Lawrence: Ó Siodhacháin.

Donal: Sheehan.

Lawrence: Sheehan. OK. And Donal was saying that he had written poems that he wanted to write down and there's other poems that he's had that no one would be interested in, and you were saying that, it's not really, the writer is not always the best judge.

Tim: Yes. I was saying, somebody should . . . get them all done and then allow people to judge what ones they want to keep, yes.

Lawrence: Right. So, like, in a way it's not really your choice. You wrote it, but now they're there, so let other people decide whether they're worthy or not worthy. But it's completely in control and has to be your own decision. My suggestion would be to get everything down and let posterity decide.

Lawrence: Right. And you're comfortable with that?

Tim: Oh very comfortable.

Lawrence: And some people might not be as comfortable with that as other people. In other words they'd say, oh people will see that I'm a bad writer. But that doesn't worry you?

Tim: I don't think anything is wasted. All the rubbish that you did, and the early stuff, and a lot of the stuff that I did, my goodness, I wouldn't embarrass myself by even looking at it now, but everything you do is helpful, it's just like an apprenticeship, it's learning a trade. And every single thing, every time I write a poem it's something new. I might end up with the same kind of style, the same everything, but it's still a new adventure every time. And decisions and decisions and decisions, and you eventually get the whole thing, your voice and style and so on. Nothing is wasted. I mean to say a waste of time writing all this, it isn't, it isn't.

Lawrence: Oh I agree with that, I really do, and I'm one of those people who think about things until it's destroyed, unfortunately.

Tim: Until it's perfect.

Lawrence: Yeah, yeah. I guess, I did want to ask about where do ideas come from, and you started to answer the question, but just to kind of think about, because I think a lot of people, well where do I begin with a poem, and I remember you were saying that you had, you were working during the day and you were writing something down so you wouldn't forget it. Does that start a poem, that little line, that little phrase . . .

Tim: Yes. I think when it comes to the actuality, two questions here really, about where is the source of ideas you know the real, real issue of source, eh, and then for the individual poem, you know, what triggered it off. There are two different things. Em, the easy one, I think, what triggers off the individual poem, and it's virtually anything. Em, when you ask about the idea of a poem, again, ideally, for me, [inaudible] you might have a hazy idea in a particular context, but the emotion, and if the poem isn't going with the emotion, then it's false, and you are being false to yourself.

Regards the reason . . . oh yeah, and another thing, I wrote a poem one time called *The Pharaoh's Sandals*, and the Pharaoh's Sandals, I gave a book to my brother-in-law, and there was a piece . . . [inaudible] he carved a likeness of two slaves or prisoners, the same kind of thing, on the soles of his sandals, and so my brother-in-law was reading a book at home and I came across it and I looked and it was just like the *Pharaoh's Sandals*, and I have no idea where I got it, absolutely no idea whatsoever, I can't understand where I got the *Pharaoh's Sandals*, but you get a combination of words, and you just have to do it, yes? And I mean the title here, *Siege*, how can anybody who has grown up Limerick not write a poem that is called *The Siege*? It's a love poem. There's a . . . Michael Longley . . . I refer to a phrase that Yeats has, a wonderful phrase, eh, 'the music of what happens', you know, what you write about, the music of what happens, and he says, the word he used was [inaudible] it was more or less [inaudible], he used it before I did. It probably belonged to Finn MacCool or somebody, but he used it first, you know, em, you know, you come across something and you just have to write about it. My real source I feel, I'm not going on too long about this?

Lawrence: No, no I'm interested in this . . .

Tim: . . . I feel my real resource is first if you have a vacuum, you never fill a vacuum. That first poem I read to you earlier, *His Letter*, my earliest memories of my mother . . . we lived . . . I grew up in John's Square, near the Cathedral, and you see my father was killed in the War as you know, what I did pick up, my mother was a widow, with two children, my sister and myself, she was a hero, twenty-one years of age, and I remember, we were living in what were called tenements, living there and I was picking up from my mother the absence, what she was missing, what she could not talk about. You can't talk to young children about that. But it was this feeling of absence. And I've written a few things in a magazine, a magazine called *Aptus*, I've written an article called *Absence* and I bring that into it, and it's all about that actually, *Aptus*, that magazine, and I wrote a poem all about this. And again this is looking at, you know, writing, poetry, you know compensating, trying to compensate for his absence.

Something inside all the time, so regardless of what you call inspiration and so, eh, there's always that kind of, you know, emptiness, something almost that is there to be filled.

Lawrence: Right.

Tim: And like with Ted Hughes' style, it's like a volcano, absolutely brimming from the unconscious and so on, incredibly powerful, but I think that there is, for me, there is something in there that will never be filled.

Lawrence: Right.

Tim: So I don't think I will ever have writer's block.

Lawrence: Right. OK. That's really, yeah, I haven't seen that. So it comes from almost a theme in a sense. It's like you make some sort of connection between the emptiness, the feeling – it's not the emptiness but the feeling of it - and some subject, and you see a relationship and that becomes maybe an inspiration for a poem?

Tim: I think it could be unconscious, you know, but I think the reason I write is essentially that. People do certain things. Why does somebody drink? Maybe he just enjoys drinking. It's a good reason to drink. Maybe he's very unhappy with life and that is really what is there because it's something that needs to be filled.

Lawrence: OK. Right. I like that. I like that explanation. I write a little myself. And we were talking about, you know, phrases that start a poem . . .

Tim: Oh yes.

Lawrence: . . . and I'm only mentioning this because it leads into another question, em, I have this poem that I haven't written yet, called [inaudible], right?

Tim: Yes.

Lawrence: And I don't know why, but I just [inaudible] this poem, and for some reason I think there's bananas in it. I don't know why that is either. But I can completely understand . . .

Tim: I mean it's surreal, isn't it?

Lawrence: Yes. It is. It's really strange. Maybe that's why I haven't written it yet. But I guess the fact that I haven't written it yet is what I want to talk about. The fact that, do all poems that start out as poems end up being finished before you start the next one, or do they come in a rush . . .

Tim: Well, at any time, I'll be working on several poems.

Lawrence: Right.

Tim: The way I normally work, I'm not very organised, I'll have something like this in my pocket, and then halfway through, and something crossed your mind, and Elliot

has the expression: distracted from distraction by distraction. And it's a bit like that, and it's just a line or a phrase, or whatever, and you go back on to what you were doing and then you do several things, maybe four or five things, and you get to a stage where one keeps emerging . . .

Lawrence: Yeah.

Tim: . . . and it's, I'm ready now, it's my time, and then you can focus and give it your time, and then you go and sleepwalk until the next one that you cast your line at . . .

Lawrence: Really. And this, that's answering my question, which is really, when do you know a poem is a poem? I guess when you start . . .

Tim: When you know a poem is a poem? For me, it's really, it's really once you've got essentially what you want to say when it's there, but you've got the sound of it. I think there are different ways of looking at it. One way is just to imagine you have a stone on the beach, a small stone and so on, and you know it's got to be polished and you know you've got to have wave after wave after wave, which can take a very, very long time.

But I think more that something, more that a line would mean exactly what I want to say. There's something that's not quite right, and you've got to get the sound right.

Poetry has got to have music. Yeats uses . . . not Yeats, a little Freudian slip, Heany would be very impressed I'm sure . . . But Heany uses the word 'cadence', which I think is a perfect word. People talk about a line and about this, that and the other, but it's the cadence, which is exactly right. Your own voice, and so on, is going to be part of what you write. If the cadence isn't right - and it's got to be your cadence - there's no point in nicking somebody else's. It's not you then. You've got to get the cadence right, that is crucial as regards the line and the sound. If that isn't there, you know, it's a false note.

Lawrence: And is there (inaudible) play? I guess what I'm asking you is . . . in academic writing, for instance, or other kinds of writing, we might have strategies that we use to develop writing, to expand our topic, but poetry is a different type of thing, I think, but I'd like to hear it from you, about what you think about this, this idea that, how you, in answer to that question, how does a poem develop, is it a matter of I'll just come back to it when I know it's time to go back to it, or with a poem do you have an idea that you know is going to develop it . . .

Tim: Yeah, well, I . . . the poem I'm writing at the moment, well first of all I would have to start thinking about what it's about, and so on, but you know, as you are writing, things keep happening, and a phrase might turn up, or an image, and obviously very, very important, you know, the kind of images that you have there, you know, come to the fore, because the unconscious keeps coming and going the whole time. All the time. And I think that when I would start, before I would start to write, virtually any poem, I'm not sure how many people this applies to, but for me, I

know I visualise what it's going to be like on a page, you know, a fairly visual idea of it. I know whether it's going to be a long skinny one, or maybe a fat one, or whatever, whether it's going to have stanzas, if it's appropriate it might have a rhyme, you know, this oral expectation, is that relevant or is that going to get in the way, or whatever. And Alan Brownhill says, you know, that you realise when it's finished, when it sounds right, you know, trust your ear.

Lawrence: Yeah.

Tim: Em, but I do think that em, what Larkin used to do, what he thought, was quite important. He wrote in a very, very traditional way. For Larkin he said one thing, he said, once you have the first line, it's off. I think for myself [inaudible] I can jot down ideas, I can jot down images and this that and the other, and once you've got the first line, it's then that the poem started. And you can go on then, and meddle around with things afterwards, but that first line is really, really important.

Lawrence: And do you have to have a sense of the form, or is the form determined after you have that first line?

Tim: Em, well, with regards to the form and so on, it's when you have an idea what it is you are writing about, you know, if you are writing about a river . . . and form . . . and .. of a river, or you visualise a river, or you visualise a nice tranquil stream in the evening, or you visualise a river in a storm or whatever, that's going to affect even the visualisation of your form.

Lawrence: Right. Yeah.

Tim: And I also believe in, in things being wholesome. Wholesome and rough. I don't like things which are, or appear to be, too synthetic . . .

Lawrence: OK.

Tim: . . . when you're finished.

Lawrence: Deconstructed.

Tim: Deconstructed, is like a little bit overdone, yes . . .

Tim: . . . like manicuring the lawn.

Lawrence: Do you ever play with form? Do you ever play with size or set limits?

Tim: Yes. I do sometimes, but I think that people go on writing courses, I mean that very very often people, you can get people going, when you present them with the form, because they know that, oh, this is it, this is the job that I've got to get done. And my suggestion would be, well do it and do it the best that you possibly can. The discipline is good, everything about it is good, and also even with rhymes [inaudible],

and talk about that, and more people will suggest an image, and the image might suggest that you have a thought, and they all begin to intertwine like that. And I'm a great believer in control in that sense. I do think you should let things happen inside your head, and let things go wild . . . I prefer wild things to cultured flowers. But anyway, it's a little bit like that.

Lawrence: Mmm.

Yeah. But I do think that when people are doing any work like that, any kind of structured work like that, regarding exercises, and eh, very often an exercise you say, well I've got to have this, why I was doing it? The bit I really like, and this reference, to the child falling down a well, and so, I say, well that's your point, you go and do the exercise by all means, and make everybody happy. Go home and write about the child falling down the well.

Lawrence: So in a way, the form of the experiment turned the production into a whole different poem.

Tim: And this is partly what I'm saying about distractions.

Lawrence: Right.

Tim: Distractions. Don't undervalue distractions.

Lawrence: Right.

Tim: Because distractions are just what people call inspiration, really.

Lawrence: Yes.

Tim: If you want to be pompous.

Lawrence: It's really strategy. I mean I think I do to some extent myself, although I sometimes get a little but too attached to the form, and less relaxed about reading it, when I probably should. Like you said, I probably should have written the poem when I went home. So that's a good strategy.

Tim: Yes.

Lawrence: Yeah. I guess one of the things that I wanted to talk about and then I want to move it into to the audience and allow people to, em, discover things, but I want to do it quickly so that people can get a chance to talk to you about, you know, asking you questions about, em, your process, you know, and they can talk to you about their process. Em, I'm thinking about two things: one of the things I'm thinking about is memory, and the role that memory plays in writing your poems. And I'm thinking in terms of its influence on the form, but also does the form help you a lot with the poem, so that in other words, like, is it a symbiotic kind of

relationship that you have? Em, I guess what I'm asking is, what is this effect that memory has, and what role it plays in writing?

Tim: General memories is . . . if you mean general memories . . . it's a lot as regards the content of what I write. I mean I'm living in England and I would absolutely love to be here. This is home to me. I write all the time to people and I have written the word 'home' in inverted commas, and so for me, I write in memories of Limerick the whole time, memories of different places, of different people and so on, so there's memories, memory in that sense, which is absolutely vital. And of course, with that, I'm living today. It doesn't mean that I'm lost, that I'm a little stray kid, you know, back there. It gives you perspective. Memories are very important. And I think again, maybe again because I'm retired and so on, I have the luxury of dealing with something like that. I think that one of the problems, and I'm not dealing with any general problems of people who write poetry, but life is very, very frightening these days and I'm not sure if people have sometimes the luxury of time to indulge a little bit, and I think you have to, to some extent.

Lawrence: Mmm.

Tim: I'm not sure if that's quite what you're asking . . .

Lawrence: Yeah. No, that is what I'm asking and it's a great answer. [Inaudible] I guess I'm thinking too about when you write a poem . . . I'm thinking of the role that memory maybe played in your education and so forth, how much memorisation . . .

Tim: Well that's another question. Slightly different question for me. When we were at school here, we did so much memorising, yes. Oh, that is so important, because, I mean, hopefully I'm writing like someone who's living in 2012, and not like someone, you know, who died in 1939. Em, but we did all the traditional poetry, and we did a tremendous amount of memory work. It wasn't just the traditional poetry in English. We did Irish poetry and we also, of course, we learnt the Latin hymns, English hymns. There was so much memory work. We went to secondary school and we learnt about commerce and all these definitions and so on, but artistically and in our heads, we had memory in school. Talk about rote memory . . . Ted Hughes, great believer in memory, in doing that. So all the songs are there. So when I started to write a bit of poetry, you remind me of that, I was writing traditionally, and because that's what I knew, that's what I felt a kind of comfort zone, like Wordsworth writing a sonnet, [inaudible] the idea of well, the satisfaction of knowing, oh that's it, you've got your fourteen lines, your iambic pentameter, you've got your [inaudible] structure or whatever, and I'm safe. That's it. It's not as simple as that once you start splashing out, you know, how far can I walk when I'm let off the leash. But having that there was probably a big advantage, and then you would move into doing something with more colloquial language and so on. Whereas a lot of people who start to write now, they don't have that background, and they're starting off with what is contemporary, and in a way you feel like, well was Picasso able to do a proper portrait or landscape or whatever before all the [inaudible] stuff?

He was a genius, of course he could have, but you can miss the foundation. I had a very, very useful foundation, because it trained your ear obviously.

Lawrence: Right. Yeah. I think people forget how important that is, in the development of the poem or in the development of the poet, you know, that sense of memory and that sense of the ability to draw . . .

Tim: It's about the song, it's the music . . .

Lawrence: I'm gonna stop myself and ask people out here if there's something that you would like to ask Tim. Donal?

Donal: Yeah Tim, just a comment, a brief comment first of all, on what you said there about the Pharaoh's Sandals, something like that sticking in mind. Ah, did you ever delve into medieval and early Irish for things like that? I'm reminded being here now, and though I read it when I was seventeen, it's haunted me all my life, where the Red Branch Knights after a fight and the ramparts of Macha, and then as now the men are canon fodder, and the poet walks along the ramparts and sees all the young men lost, and he describes it as 'their sightless eyes reflect the sky and their beardless faces turning cold'. And there is something about that that haunted me. But getting back to what you're saying there about teachers, I know a number of poet friends that are also teachers, and as teachers you're trained to process knowledge in an analytical, linear way, which maybe isn't often the best approach for poetry. How do you reconcile the two, or is there a conflict, because poetry is more a position of synthesis and how much to you find your former teacher training, and the way you were trained to process knowledge, helping your poetry or hindering your poetry?

Lawrence: Good question.

Tim: I have been absolutely blessed being able to forget whatever is artificial. Whatever is pushed, whatever you've been told you should be doing, and so on, and either this song, or this feeling and so on, and all of that goes to the background. What you are saying about the historical situation and so on. I mean there are poets who will deal with historical situations very well, but I'd be more inclined like to say, in writing about, let's say a poem like the *Siege*, to use something like that, you know to adapt it to, you know, a contemporary situation . . .

Donal: But that's what I mean. I actually did that in a poem about . . .

Yes.

Donal: . . . an anti-war poem about the Falklands Islands where I integrated it into a modern war poem.

Tim: Yes. A very, very powerful thing.

Donal: And it was a very powerful, it was a powerful image.

Tim: And they also say, of course, in poetry, don't be afraid to steal. You know, you're not going to be arrested. And again, people think they're original. What originality is there? Really. What originality? You look back - Shakespeare didn't even have a dictionary to work from.

Lawrence: Yes.

Donal: The Kerry songwriter, the late Sean McCarthy, described, said everybody writing poetry or songs in Ireland were no more than magpies of words.

Lawrence: Well, I guess I'd say the same thing about [inaudible], I'd say the same thing about [inaudible]. I think everybody borrows from everybody else.

Tim: In the context of your own time. And you're also aware that young people won't have, like, what you would have had. They won't have that until much later or so on . . .

Lawrence: Well, let me ask, is there somebody else who would like to ask a question? Yes.

Audience member: The poems that you read, and I'm not familiar with your other work, so the poems that you read seemed to have some sort of emotional, em, very personal emotional experience that you then use [inaudible] the wider world. And I was wondering if that's normally how you would proceed? Or the way you explained, everything is [inaudible] but I'm wondering if everything that's inside and comes out is also . . .

Tim: Everything is personal. Anybody who tells you they are being objective, they might mean they're trying to be objective. Absolutely everything is personal. Everything is from your own experience, whatever people write about. They might say, oh no.

No matter how academic, or whatever, a thing might be, they've read it, I mean they've come across it, it's become part of them. It's inevitable it's personal. I'm not sure if that's a proper answer for you. But very much for me, I begin with emotions. My well, my wellbeing is in emotional wealth. Em, but it also, there's a lining with that, I know something is trying to push outside of that lining.

Lawrence: Are you asking also, is it perpetuating the emotion that initially started the poem, by writing the poem?

Audience member: Well, perpetuating it . .

Lawrence: . . . or developing it?

Audience member: Developing it, yes.

Lawrence: Yes, exploding it. I understand.

Audience member: Yes.

Lawrence: Does that happen? That the emotional inspiration that starts the poem leads to new emotions which lead to new poems?

Tim: Em, you have the maybe same emotion but you maybe have different imagery to go with it. I mean, writing about my mother, [inaudible], I remember her dusting with the old goose wings, getting into the crannies and so on. Another, my father wrote to her once, one of the memories about my father, I remember we had a ship in a bottle, the clipper in the bottle, and I know my father didn't smoke, and the reason I know that he didn't smoke is because he had this clipper in the bottle, and I know that he got that from another soldier, swapping for his cigarettes, his ration of cigarettes, and things like that. But images come in. The thing is they are all so connected. When somebody says, and I'm always against false oppositions, when somebody says, is it this, or is it that, it's nearly always a combination,[inaudible] the only time it stops, far stronger than the other. But yes, I am a very emotional poet, yes.

Lawrence: Do you have a question?

Audience member: Actually, you were speaking earlier on about other people judging your work. Did you have that fear when you started writing, when you started out?

Tim: Em, I think when I started writing I never thought about what other people would think. You just write. What happens about what other people think, eh, is that when you start to take it a bit seriously, and somebody says, oh that's good, you should send it away. When a young person comes to me and shows me a few poems, and you look and say, oh my God, no! What do I say? How can I be tactful? And you've got to say to them, mm, you pick on something that is nice, something that is positive and so on, and then you say, well of course, very oftentimes they say, well how do I go about getting a book? Or how do I go about getting a book publisher and you say, well, have you tried any magazines yet? And you say, what you really have to do is send your best poems to magazines and, you know, see how you get on. And then when you have, you know, a nice number there, then think about approaching a publisher, and the reality would be, when you ask [inaudible] think about what you do. This can be very hard for some young people, but when they get them all back [inaudible], channelling their talents in another direction.

Lawrence: Hmm.

Tim: But thinking about what other people think is quite important. I mean I'm married. And there's a censorship there. And there are some things that I would like

to write, but I know they are the kind of things that if my wife were to see it, she would disapprove of, for different reasons, not for aesthetical reasons, and that can be a tough one. So I think it does matter. Eh, for a lot, for most writers, eh, I think what [inaudible] might be more important than what your wife thinks. We are also living in a real human world. And again, that also is very interesting, because, you know, when somebody dies, you'll find that somebody is writing and have taken on a new lease of life when, ironically, very often they have been released. They are now free to write about some things. And so I know some writers, very very well known writers, and they get these plaudits, these wonderful book they brought out when somebody died. And then you find two years later they've met some dolly bird or whatever, or maybe absolutely a lovely woman, and their perspective alters, life moves on and so on. And what would their wife have said? She would have said, I want him to be happy.

Lawrence: Yeah. That is funny, because I was thinking when you were saying that I had this, well he wasn't a friend, he was an acquaintance, who committed suicide and my boss at the time, he was really angry, and he didn't work in the same company or anything, he just knew him. But – he was like a customer. But, em, he wasn't angry because the guy committed suicide, he was angry because he did it before his mother died. That is what he was angry about. Like you say, he was like, I don't mind if the guy waits until everybody who cares about him is dead, but Jesus, to do that before everybody, well his mum was alive [inaudible]. Big time. Yeah.

Tim: Something, I don't know if you will ask but I would like to mention: how I started writing in the first place. The first little poem I remember writing, I was about six years of age and I didn't have a birthday card from my mother. We made our own. And I remember a little verse there I wrote it out and I still remember that. When I was about in my early twenties, I was teaching English in a school in Dublin, and, eh, I came across a book that had different kinds of writing, and it included a sonnet by some guy called Wordsworth. And I looked at this, it was a [inaudible] sonnet, and the other side of the page was telling you how to write a sonnet. And at that time my uncle was ill, and so I said, I can do that. So I wrote a sonnet for my uncle in Rosehill. And then, very, very shortly after that it was my sister's birthday, so I wrote a sonnet for my sister's birthday. And then – this wasn't an emotional thing coming from me to express myself, because you are asking very much about this area, which is very, very important – very, very important. But then after a while, whatever I was dealing with, that was worth thinking about, I found that was my natural way of expression. And that was it. There were no sonnets after that, but that's how it started. And another thing, again about form and about style,

I remember one time when I was in my, em, early twenties, and I was writing traditionally, and I was writing a poem, and there was a lot at the time about thalidomide. And I wrote a poem in a traditional way about this kind of situation, and a very sympathetic poem and [inaudible] and all that, in a traditional poem, and I looked at it and, this isn't right . . . it just doesn't . . . I feel there's something not right here. Rather than say, what way should I write about a situation like this I thought the honest thing to do was to do both. Do another version of the poem. So

I did what was probably the first one that was free. And side by side. It was an interesting experience. Also, at the time, for some reason this poetry thing was in my head and where I was at the time I didn't have books and so on, but somebody gave me a copy of *The Wasteland* and I wrote out *The Wasteland* on it.

Lawrence: Right.

Tim: Not many people have done that.

Lawrence: Right. Yes. I don't know why that worked. Something happens in your head.

Tim: No, I couldn't get . . . I couldn't afford the book, I couldn't afford to buy it. So I borrowed somebody's and I wrote it out on it.

Lawrence: There you go. That's good. Did you have a question?

Audience member: Do you write for yourself or for other people?

Tim: I don't think about it. And people come along about me commissioning poems and say, oh you should write about this, you must write about that, and I say, no, it doesn't work like that. But if somebody suggests something that I would have written anyway, well that might be the trigger to have done that. But for other people, in the sense of an occasion of some loss, or somebody dying, I mean something like that, I mean for a family, I could do that, but there wouldn't be any conflict in . . .

Audience member: I don't mean in that way . . .

Tim: Yes.

Audience member: . . . I mean, do you write for other people to read it?

Tim: Yes, of course.

Audience member: You do.

Tim: Oh yes. I mean anybody who's writing, you get to a stage where anything you do, if you feel, well if it isn't worth publishing, then . . .

Audience member: [Inaudible]

Tim: Yes.

Audience member: I would write for myself.

Tim: Yes.

Audience member: Because it didn't bother me, ever. If someone says to you, do you think you fear rejection. Everybody seems to be busy, wanting to be published, wanting to be published.

Tim: Yes.

Tim: No, I mean as a yardstick. And as a yardstick, if I do something, and I feel, well, I don't think anybody would touch that, I feel well maybe I haven't finished it, maybe I could improve on it, ah because, I mean forget about the publishing thing, you want an audience . . .

Audience member: You do.

Tim: Very few people want to write exclusively singing to the wall and listening to the echo.

Audience member: Fine.

Lawrence: Sometimes you still end up doing that, but . . .

Tim: Yes but that's fine. The important thing is that people will write. And everybody writes. I mean, you talk to kids and it's, aaaghhh, it's not cool, that kind of thing. But they'll have their little line in their diary.

Lawrence: Yes. There's a guy in our neighbourhood who is a bit rough. And he apparently approached somebody else who knew – because he knew he was related to me, and he wanted him to ask me if I would read his poems. It was like a real long sinewy, you know, way to my attention.

Audience member: [inaudible] regional writing centre, because somebody did say to me, do you not fear rejection? And I thought well, why? But no. Last night, working through [inaudible] about writing, doing something for the regional writing centre, and for the first time [inaudible], and I sent you a [inaudible] in the regional writing centre.

Lawrence: When did you send it?

Audience member: Last night.

Lawrence: Oh, last night. OK.

Audience member: And it was the first time to make me feel, maybe I do, do I . . .

Tim: In the first place you've got to write for yourself. You've got to write for yourself. You've got to satisfy yourself. You've got to satisfy yourself about what you want to say for yourself. You are writing for yourself. But the other thing, the

other side of that is, eh, (inaudible) and so on, I think there's a real (inaudible), especially for young people, that if somebody doesn't approve of the way they're writing, you've got to be very, very strong and say, hang on, this is me. You've got to stick with yourself. You have got to be true to yourself. If you've got some publisher saying, oh we don't like this and we don't like that, well then you say, it's just too bad because somebody else may be writing to please you, but this is the way that I write.

Lawrence: Right. Find a publisher who does . . .

Audience member: I (inaudible) that it's got to be right. And I want it to be right for me.

Lawrence: Sure

Audience member: And that's where I'm always vulnerable.

Tim: But if you were, if you were to write a poem for a friend, wouldn't you like your friend to say, oh I like that. And wouldn't you like your friend to really appreciate it. In a way what I'm saying is that, in a way it validates what you have done, but there's the real danger that when somebody disapproves, or doesn't quite get what you've done, that you feel that it's invalidated, and that's dangerous. That's dangerous ground. You have to really believe in yourself. And to believe in yourself you have to know yourself. And you might have to be very, very pigheaded sometimes, and go against a lot . . . because a lot of what is current at one time, in six months time it's out of date.

Lawrence: Sure.

You get – there's a beautiful American writer – she's beautiful looking as well - [inaudible] – do you know of her? Because she has written some absolutely beautiful, you know, formal poetry. Em, it's a bit like Henry James coming to Europe, and a lot of it is European, eh, and it's absolutely beautifully written. And very, very, very interesting, and I mean she is a wonderful craftswoman. And it's terrific. And, em, but not everybody would be able to do that. She can look at the contemporary situation as well, you know, in that style, but the danger with a lot of people is that it just becomes archaic.

Lawrence: Sure. I'm gonna have to . . . it's coming really close to 4 o'clock and we've been instructed that we need to be out of here at 4 o'clock. Em, like, they will bring in weapons and stuff if we don't. I do have time, one more question.

Tim: Do you have a question? You don't have a question, do you, that you want to ask?

Lawrence: I don't think so. Do you write? You don't write, no?

Tim: Anyway, thanks for coming. It's lovely to have somebody young here.

Lawrence: I guess I just wanted to ask you, and I didn't do this at the beginning and I guess it's just a quick exercise, for you, in just trying to characterise your process. Em, if we think of process as, like, what happens to initiate a poem, what happens in between that time and the time that the poem is abandoned, and if you think of all the strategies that you use to bring yourself to a place where the poem is ready to be abandoned, how would you characterise this process?

Tim: A bit like fishing really.

Lawrence: Ah, huh. I've heard you use that analogy before.

Tim: Yes. I think . . . But you can't force anything. And you have, if you have a genuine kind of, for me again I come back to feelings, if I you have a general kind of sensation or whatever, and you've got to have, you know, the bricks and mortar and so on of, you know, ideas, structure, form, imagery and so on. Imagery is so, so important. And, eh, and a direction. Em, as somebody, you know . . .

[Interruption]

Lawrence: Are you coming to join us?

Official: I'd love to. There's a county council meeting here in 20 minutes.

Tim: And that's more important than poetry?

[Laughter]

Tim: Good heavens.

Lawrence: In fairness, I did say we'd be out of here by 4 o'clock.

Tim: You're very good. Thank you.

Lawrence: Well I want to thank Tim folks, for being here, and for submitting to this interview. Em, I hope it was good for you?

Tim: It was lovely.

Lawrence: It was lovely for me as well. It was great for me.

Tim:

Yes, very enjoyable.

Lawrence: Thank you.