

HOW I WRITE, IRELAND: AN INTERVIEW WITH TOM MOYLAN

LAWRENCE CLEARY: OK. Right. Well, everybody, welcome. Em. We have lots of people – would people from architecture raise your hands, so that we can see you? Oh, look at that. See! Right! Good stuff. OK. Let me introduce Tom Moylan. Em, I'm going to speak to Tom today about how he writes. Em, basically this initiative is to talk to people who are valued writers, to find out the kinds of strategies that they use when they write, em, to find out what their process is like and see if we can't learn something from them, eh, that we might be able to use in our own process, eh, some strategies we might be able to use to make us better writers.

Em, Tom is the Glucksman Professor Emeritus in the School of Languages, Literature, Culture and Communications here at UL. He is also the Adjunct Professor in the School of Architecture at the University of Limerick, em, where he is also Co-Director of the Ralahine Centre for Utopian Studies and Co-Editor of the *Ralahine Utopian Studies Book Series*. He is also author of *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* and I've just recently learned that he, his 25th edition of *Demand The Impossible* is coming out. It's a collection of his essays . . .

TOM MOYLAN: Twenty-fifth anniversary.

LAWRENCE: Oh, the anniversary, I'm sorry. I thought it was the twenty-fifth edition.

TOM: If only. [laughter]

LAWRENCE: I'm reading his writing, guys. OK. A collection of his essays on Utopia and Political Agency. Em, and he's also author of *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, and he's also, he's written many essays on utopian, dystopia and political agency. Eh, he's co-editor of *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, eh, he's doing that with Jamie Owen Daniel. He's co-editor of . . . are you co-editor of *Dark Horizons* as well? Yeah. *Science Fiction, Dystopia and Imagination* and also of *Utopia Method Vision: the Use Value of Social Dreaming*, and he's doing that with Raffaella Baccolini:

TOM: Baccolini.

LAWRENCE: Baccolini. Baccolini. And *Exploring the Utopian Impulse* – this is new I think, is it?

TOM: No, that's old too.

LAWRENCE: Is it old? OK. *Exploring the Utopian Impulse: Essays on the Utopian Code and Practice*, and you did that with Michael Griffin. And that's out of Trinity, is it? Is it published by Trinity?

TOM: No. That's in our Book Series.

LAWRENCE: In your book series. OK. Yeah. Em, he's also co-edited specialist issues of *Utopian Studies* on *Ernst Bloch*, *Fredric Jameson*, *Irish Utopias* and *Utopian Music*. Eh, with Nathaniel Coleman and Diane Morgan he has just organised the Architecture and Utopia Working Group. Hence the significance of all these architecture students who are here today. Em, Good for You! Good for you!

TOM: What?

LAWRENCE: Just , working with architects. I just think they're the coolest people on the planet!

TOM: So do I. [laughter]

LAWRENCE: Yeah. I really do. What is that? What is that? I don't know why we . . .

TOM: Because they think three dimensionally.

LAWRENCE: Yes. I think that's it, yeah.

TOM: I learned more teaching them than I think they learned.

LAWRENCE: I should mention on – WRP – that's . . . what is his name, the full name, WRP?

TOM: WRB – with Raffaella Baccolini.

LAWRENCE: Raffaella Baccolini, oh, OK, doing a *Utopian Science Fiction Reader*, em, and it's a work of original fiction and critical essays, if I'm not mistaken. Yes. OK. Lots of stuff going on in your life. It's really great. Em. Tom, I'd like to start by asking you if you would, em, I would like to invite you, to kind of like, we talk a lot about writing processes and I would like to invite you to kind of characterise your writing process for us. How would you characterise your writing process?

TOM: Well, first, let me say thank you, and thank Íde for the conversation we had about a year ago that made this finally happen. So, thank you. Well, I was just saying to Clare before this started, writing has to do with being neurotic and being obsessive.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: So, it's a difficult process and it never gets easy. Ever.

LAWRENCE: Cool. Right.

TOM: Eh, in fact, I don't know, maybe it's getting harder.

LAWRENCE: Is it?

TOM: Yeah. It's a process that has changed for me, but there's a basis to it. Eh, there's a long period of germination, em, and brainstorming and note-taking, and one thing I've learned from my architectural colleagues is how to buy a moleskin notebook that's officially black and I can take many notes in it. Em, and then the process: I was taught by nuns, and so I was taught very rigidly and strictly. I learned good grammar and I learned good planning and so, at least to begin with, I developed a very linear process. I had to have an outline. I had to have a beginning, a middle and an end. And I could never write the middle before I wrote the beginning.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: If I don't get a first sentence out, if I don't get a first paragraph out, I'm lost.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: So I really have to go from here to there to there. So that's the first point about the process. Second thing is the periods of the day in which I work. Eh, you know, Marx talks about, eh, you know, reaching a life where we, eh, you know, work in the morning and do sheep herding in the afternoon and drink and converse in the evening and so forth. Well, there's a certain version of that with writing. I plan in the evening and put out the materials for the morning in an outline. And then if, on days when I'm really writing, em, I get up in the morning and I go straight to the keyboard and start writing, before my first cup of coffee.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: And there's a sort of a sense of downloading what's been unconsciously developing overnight. Em, and sometimes in the middle of the night I'll wake up and take notes and I'll have scraps of paper. So there's the morning download, if you will, and then I'll take a break. And that could be an hour, it could be three hours. It used to be five, but it's not any more. Em, and then there's a shift of gears from being a writer to being an editor.

LAWRENCE: Mm hmm.

TOM: And so later in the day, it's going back over the material and being an editor. And then at night, maybe with a glass of wine, being an editor in a different key and being a little more relaxed. I used to be smoking a joint doing that but it's becoming more and more less [inaudible] at this point. [laughter]

LAWRENCE: It's getting harder and harder . . .

TOM: But I would never, I would never write in that context . . . no. No, it's not. [laughter] I would never write in that context, I would edit and revise. So that's . . . and then I would lay out the material for the next day and then I would be . . . The other part of that process is because I do, I've done all my work as a full-time teacher, I very seldom had time, big years to write, and so I had to struggle to find days, and chunks of days, two or three days at a time, to do a period of writing, and, I don't know, you probably all know this, there's that transition that has to happen, from your everyday life, as a person, as a teacher, as a whatever to whatever it is we are when we're writers, and it's factoring in that transition time as well. There has to be about, you know, a 24 hour period of some sort of dithering before the writing engages.

But that's the process. Three changes have happened. Can I do those?

LAWRENCE: Mmm.

TOM: In the process . . . I mean this is something that started, you know, maybe fifty years ago,

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: Eh, but three things happened. I taught at the Crawford College of Art for a year in the mid-80s, and I was teaching writing to, it's a little like the architecture thing now, I was teaching writing to fine art students, to painters especially. And they couldn't get over how I worked in a linear fashion, because they don't. They build up a painting from the canvass. And there's

something they taught me about layering, about being recursive, that helped to loosen up that linear process. That was a really important breakthrough.

The next important breakthrough was the computer. I went from longhand to my Smith Corona typewriter. But finally, with the computer, you know, the magical thing about being able to block and edit, completely changed my ability to edit and to polish.

LAWRENCE: Mmm.

TOM: Eh, because I'm really lazy. And I would write a draft and, if I didn't have a girlfriend or a wife, to retype it, bad thing to say, em, you know, I'd hate to, I'd hate to do it. I couldn't stand retyping. And the great thing about computers is that you avoided that.

And the third breakthrough, em, was because of my shaky hands. You've all seen them shake and you all think, Oh my God, does this guy have Parkinson's or does he have the DTs? Or am I just a hopeless drunk? I'm neither. It's a familial tremor. It runs in the family. But about three years ago I got Dragon voice-activated software, and that's really been another change.

So, the layering from the painting, and the computer, and now the Dragon software . . . Two things happened with that and I've actually convinced a few people to start using it, who don't even have this problem, Mike Griffin tends to use it now quite a bit, for example. If I'm somewhere like in a cafe, or on a beach, or on a train, I'll start writing rough drafts in my notebook, and then later all I have to do is read them in to my computer. I open up my Dragon and I talk it out.

But the other thing I've started doing is composing, straight from my head to the screen, via my voice. It makes the writing easier, but it's also created a new voice, it's really loosened me up.

LAWRENCE: Mm hmm. Like you're reading your speech?

TOM: I'm speaking. Well, if I write it here I'm reading it.

LAWRENCE: But I mean, like, when you speak it appears?

TOM: Yep. I'm just talking to my Dragon and my Dragon and I have . . .

LAWRENCE: I actually, I wanted to, I wanted to come back to that because I know, you had spoken, we had met a couple of weeks ago at Scholars and you had spoken about that. There

were two things I wanted to come back to. One was just, before we come back to that, was the painting and I thought it was really interesting, because it's been my experience as well, but I don't know that a lot of people allow themselves to do this, but what you did was you observed somebody else's process, which had nothing to do with writing, and asked yourself, how can that apply to my process of writing, and I thought that was really interesting. Em, are there other processes that you have observed and taken, maybe incorporated into your writing process?

TOM: Well, maybe the notebook.

LAWRENCE: Mm hmm.

TOM: It's a sort of habit that you architects have with constantly taking notes and drawing figures and so forth and that's . . . You know, I've always kept a journal, I've kept a journal forever. I've got stacks of them. Ah, but journaling is different from this kind of note-taking.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: And the observing of the layering process really wasn't just observing. It was hearing my students tell me . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: . . . that I should think differently about writing. It was their doing . . .

LAWRENCE: Oh they were actually saying that to you?

TOM: They told me, why are you doing this to yourself?

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

TOM: Why don't you just loosen up and let it happen? So . . .

LAWRENCE: So, you did?

TOM: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: Em, the other thing I was really interested in is, what happens to that drafting process when you speak into the machine and it types for you? How does that change the process of drafting? In other words, we think of drafting as the place where ideas start to develop, em, we discover what it is we're trying to say, em, so, we are pretty loose with our language hopefully at that stage, because we are just trying to get our ideas down on a paper, we're not really too worried about whether they sound well in relation to the audience yet. Em, so in your experience, how is it different, how does it change that part of the process for you?

TOM: It, it's actually, that stage of talking, talking a draft, is later than the brainstorming process.

LAWRENCE: Right. Oh, yeah.

TOM: I'll go through a lot of steps of taking notes, reading and taking notes, and I'm not meticulous. I don't keep note-cards. I have things written on the back of books, you know, and I've post-it notes stuck in books. I'm not very systematic.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

TOM: So there's that, there's collating all that and there's several versions of working out either an outline or a spoken beginning . . .

LAWRENCE: Mm hmm.

TOM: . . . either on scraps of paper or in the notebook. So then there comes a day when I have to set all that aside and say, OK it's Monday morning and I've got to write a draft this week.

LAWRENCE: Mm hmm.

TOM: And I used to try to take all those and talk about them, but then I'd forget I did them.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: So I'd done the brainstorming and that initial planning, and then I'd just write down some bullet points and I'd talk it out. And what I do is I try to talk through the whole argument . . .

LAWRENCE: Mm hmm.

TOM: . . . and don't worry about the details.

LAWRENCE: OK.

TOM: I don't worry about quotations or examples or whatever. I just try to download again the main argument. That then becomes my rough draft.

LAWRENCE: Mm hmm.

TOM: And then I layer and work and re-work.

LAWRENCE: OK. And do you do that through the Dragon as well?

TOM: No. What I do then is, is I print off what I've done.

LAWRENCE: OK.

TOM: And I always do it on two pages to save paper. Em, and I read that at night. And then I get up in the morning, if there is a morning, and, and enter these changes in. And then I'll read through the whole draft again. And sometimes I'll do that with the keyboard, and sometimes I'll do that with, with the microphone.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: It depends on the day.

LAWRENCE: Mm hmm. I mean one of the things that you had said was, and it's something that reminds me of something that Peter Elbow had said about the idea that this relationship between speech and writing, and how people who allow themselves to speak into their paper, rather than write into their paper, actually have livelier language. And do you find that this process is giving you . . . you said something about how it's changed the way you that you speak in your paper.

TOM: Yeah, I think it is. I think it's livelier. It's . . . it's not conversational but it gets closer to being conversational.

LAWRENCE: OK. Right. Which is more speech-like.

TOM: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

TOM: I mean, and you know, going back to the nuns, going back to academia, you get, as a literature student you really get trained to write in a certain way, and it's a fairly rigid . . . and then there's the kind of academic tone that you're expected to have. But I . . . because I was always doing my research and my writing while I was teaching, or else politically active, I always felt that my writing was not as an academic but as an intellectual.

LAWRENCE: Mmm.

TOM: My writing was always political . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: . . . so it always had a tone. But still, it was a scholarly tone. And this new process, I think, is maybe making it a little more acceptable, and accessible.

LAWRENCE: Mmm.

TOM: Shorter sentences. Getting rid of semi-colons.

LAWRENCE: Right. Well OK. Let me, em, let me ask you this. I want to try and touch on of the different, em, stages of the writing process, and also some of the strategies that people use during those different stages. One of the things I was, I was hoping to ask you about was something that a lot of people have, they spend a lot of time anguishing over, is coming up with something to say. And what I was wondering is, em, is there a particular book or a particular article that was really interesting in the way that it came about, the way that you came to a place where you said, I'm going to write about that? Or did they have . . . is there a particular . . . is there a usual way for things to happen in your process, in terms of getting started on an essay or a book or . . .

TOM: There's never, there's never an epiphany moment . . .

LAWRENCE: OK.

TOM: . . . em, I kind of swim in this stuff. I'm sort of always thinking about utopia, science fiction and politics.

LAWRENCE: Mmm.

TOM: And, and I'm always sort of reaching and grabbing and pulling on things. Em, and then there's either a conference, or a conference topic, or a book project and I'm invited to do something . . .

LAWRENCE: Mmm.

TOM: . . . and so then I have to dip into this pool of stuff that I swim in and do something that's targeted. Like, lately I've been invited to give keynote lectures at several big conferences, and that's really forced me, eh, with a lot of anxiety, I'll come back to that, em, to target. So there's never an epiphany as much as there is a kind of a constant mining.

LAWRENCE: OK. Right. I would imagine this relationship between utopia, dystopia and politics, is something . . . is that something that is inherent in the subject, or is it something that you bring to the subject?

TOM: Eh, both.

LAWRENCE: OK.

TOM: I, you know, it's back to Marxist things about philosophers understanding the world and the rest of us having to change the world. I guess my writing has always been engaged . . .

LAWRENCE: Mm hmm.

TOM: . . . so I'm always trying to find an angle to argue for a way to talk about such a change.

LAWRENCE: And I guess that's what I'm asking, is like how do you find that angle? Where do you go for that?

TOM: Well, I go two places. I go into, into actually existing politics and then my, my area, the stuff that I love, is science fiction.

LAWRENCE: OK.

TOM: And science fiction is all about thinking about the world in a different way . . .

LAWRENCE: Mm hmm.

TOM: . . . in a different key, and it's a way to kind of torque our minds, so that we look at things differently . . .

LAWRENCE: Mm hmm.

TOM: And to me that's a very rich area. So, things will happen. I mean things happen to me in the middle of the night.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: That's when the best ideas come and, you know, the famous thing about having a paper and pen there . . .

LAWRENCE: And you do?

TOM: . . . I do.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

TOM: Sometimes I can't read it in the morning. [laughter]

LAWRENCE: That's my problem.

TOM: I write it down without turning the lights on.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

TOM: And, a thing I did the other day is that I wrote it down on top of something I've already written. [laughter] [inaudible]

LAWRENCE: OK. Em, one of the things that . . . OK, we'd spoken also . . . em, let me see . . . eh, OK, I already asked you about that, but we talk to students all the time about what they do to achieve their writing goals and we categorise strategies and, basically our categorisation is

inspired by a lady named Rebecca Oxford, who write a book called *Language Learning Strategies*, and she categorised language learning strategies as cognitive, meta-cognitive, affective and social. And so, we try to talk to students about social strategies they have for developing their writing, em, you know, things, you know, emotional issues that are either furthering their goals or preventing them from reaching their goals. You just spoke about anxiety. Em, what are some of the ways, what are some of the anxieties that you feel, and then what are some of the things that you do overcome them so that you can get your writing done?

TOM: That's probably the biggest question.

LAWRENCE: Is it? Yeah.

TOM: Or the biggest challenge.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, yeah.

TOM: Em, coming from a working class household with no books, with no cultural capital either, I constantly feel I don't belong.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: I still feel I don't belong. I'm, I'm, my daughter and I, who is now teaching at the University, we talk about the imposter syndrome, you know, that I'm not meant to be doing this. So there's that whole kind of psychic construct . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: . . . and then what happens with that is that when you, when I start to write something new, I go through what I call my truck driver moment, because what I really should be doing is not writing but driving a truck like my dad did. [laughter] You know, why am I doing this? So there's that, there's that disempowerment, that sense that, that, I don't have anything to say and, if I did, I couldn't say it anyway.

LAWRENCE: Mmm.

TOM: And I hate it with a new writing project. I can edit forever. But to begin something new means having to somehow find that achieved empowerment in myself . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: . . . and to tap back into that. And it's, I don't know if I have an answer. I guess it's a process of sneaking up on myself . . .

LAWRENCE: Mm hmm.

TOM: . . . and maybe that has to do with this thing of, of going to bed with a plan and getting up in the morning and starting, before I start to think about how disempowered I really am.

LAWRENCE: Well, if you do it before you have a coffee, I can understand how that works.

TOM: It's like getting in there in a work trance and by the time . . . and it's always writing that first paragraph.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: Once that's done, once that's broken open, than OK, I can move on. But it's, it's claiming that voice.

LAWRENCE: And it's always at the beginning of the piece that you have to confront that, when you're starting a new project?

TOM: Yeah. From then on it's just, you know, good work.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: But it's that first utterance.

LAWRENCE: You do a lot of . . .

TOM: It has to do with being shy too.

LAWRENCE: OK. Right. Not being a social beast.

TOM: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

TOM: There's a shyness on the paper, even.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: Who am I?

LAWRENCE: Which always comes through. Sure. Is it, has anybody ever responded to that, like, especially in terms of like when you submit to journals? Is that any part of the feedback at all? That you need to be more bold, or more authoritative or . . .

TOM: It did with my second book. Funny you should ask. The second book had a lot to do with reviewing existing criticism in science fiction and I quoted direct sources a lot more than I normally do.

LAWRENCE: Right. OK.

And one referee said, I'd like to hear more of your voice.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: You know. That was . . .

LAWRENCE: Very good.

TOM: But maybe it had to do with the stage I was going through in my life at the time.

LAWRENCE: Sure.

Yeah.

LAWRENCE: Yeah. Fair enough.

TOM: Yeah, but most times I describe that, that neuroses, or what I would call that, and people say, well I can't believe it. But it's there.

LAWRENCE: Yeah. Em, do you have people that you consult about your writing? In other words do you show your writing to people, eh, during drafting stages, after drafting stages, before it goes to publishers, or . . .

TOM: Yeah. Yeah.

LAWRENCE: Who are those people? What are their relationships to you?

TOM: Well, if you notice, as you were saying, a lot of my work is collaborative.

LAWRENCE: Mm hmm.

TOM: I've co-edited now four books, three books . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: . . . with other people.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: And so I like that.

LAWRENCE: You like that dynamic?

TOM: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

TOM: Yeah. And then, and there's a set of trusted people because of that. You know, Raffaella Baccolini being one, and . . .

LAWRENCE: Mm hmm.

TOM: . . . and then certain other people that I'll send drafts to. Eh, and then my daughters.

LAWRENCE: Cool.

TOM: You know, Katie's now a lecturer in media studies and Sarah's an architect. And they had to suffer through my dissertation as kids . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: . . . and now we collaborate. Em, there's this like three way thing going on between my work, Sarah's work as an architect and Katie's in media studies, and we read each other's work. We read each other's work as adults.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: And I can read . . . and of course they don't hold back. [laughter]

LAWRENCE: You're dad.

TOM: That's why I'm here. [laughter] But they're really good respondents, yeah.

LAWRENCE: Em, I'm going to just ask another question here and then I'm going to try and open it up to the floor. Eh, well, yeah. One or two questions here and then I'll open it up to the floor. I want to give people time to ask questions of Tom. Eh, one of the big questions I had is your subject is utopia, dystopia, political agency. OK. And one of the questions I had was, how has your topic shaped your writing? In other words, em, what forces require you to order in a particular way, or that kind of compel you communicate in particular forms, em, and when I'm asking this I'm thinking about this book that we had, *First Year Composition*. Well it wasn't first year composition but it was shortly after that that you start looking for books on rhetoric and composition. And I ran into this book by Ray Fabrizio, called *The Rhetoric of No*. And you refer, and I think it's in *Scraps of Untainted Sky*, you refer to utopia as making, as opening space for opposition.

TOM: Mmm.

LAWRENCE: And I'm wondering if there's, if that is a big part of how you, how you write. In other words, what does that do in terms of, to the form that you end up with when you write?

TOM: Form or content?

LAWRENCE: Well, I'm thinking more about the form, the way that the content is organised, and the way the language is chosen, and does it have any effect on how you organise your text,

for instance, the rhetoric of no, or the rhetoric of opposition, the way that, em, utopia opens up that space. Is it kind of like, does it happen slowly, does it happen from behind, does it sneak up on people, or how do you present it?

TOM: That's a good question. I don't know. I'll have to go away and think about it. In the middle of the night I'll write it down and tell you. [laughter] It's not just a rhetoric of no. The thing about, about thinking as a utopian is that it's a rhetoric of yes that comes after the rhetoric of no.

LAWRENCE: OK.

TOM: And there's . . . Ernst Bloch, the great utopian philosopher, talks about a warm stream of Marxism and a cold stream. And the cold stream tends to emphasize the rhetoric of no, good negativity critique saying what is wrong with the world.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: I can't simply do that. I, there's such a hopefulness in me, and in the works I read, that I have to be looking for the next step of organising, the next step of taking something forward.

LAWRENCE: Mmm.

TOM: So, it's, it's not a Pollyanna thing. It's not like the world's gonna be better.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: What's the next step of the hard work that has to be done? So, any piece that I write has to have that, that kind of negativity to start with and then a positivity, but a positivity that's not simple-minded or Pollyannish.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: So it's . . . in that sense maybe it is tone, there's a positive tone, but I have to work hard to keep that tone sober.

LAWRENCE: Well, in a sense, and you're also, it sounds like you're making space for both: this, this kind of rhetoric of opposition, but this rhetoric of filling space with something positive . . .

TOM: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: . . . this space that's opened up. So I could see that as part of the form, in the sense that you need to first outline this, this open space, and then you need to outline what is, what conceivably could fill.

TOM: It goes against a lot of what people might recognise as post-structuralist or deconstructivist . . .

LAWRENCE: Mm hmm.

TOM: . . . eh, kind of academic criticism, which has gotten very happy with simply saying no, and simply deconstructing, to dare to talk about something positive is, is pretty unfashionable.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: Not so much anymore, because people are finally doing it.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: Eh, but it means claiming a voice that's maybe not as accepted academically.

LAWRENCE: Mmm.

TOM: Or hadn't been, anyway.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: Right.

LAWRENCE: Right. Ah. So that would be . . . that would definitely play on the language. I mean the language would be different in that situation because, I mean, we'd be able to distinguish this voice that we don't typically think of as being academic. Maybe it's a freedom that you have in your form?

TOM: Which, which then goes back to writing . . . I wrote my dissertation while, well I was teaching full-time and I already had tenure. I didn't need a PhD. I didn't need a dissertation.

So I wrote it as, as a creative act, not as an academic exercise. So there's always been that kind of freedom.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: Now, but as I said, I had a kind of rigid, scholarly tone then and part of this voice activated software, it made me, you know, being at the point where I am now where I don't care as much. There's more freedom . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: . . . to be looser with the language.

LAWRENCE: Good. Yeah. Yeah. Because I imagine a lot of those people who are just starting out, or who are relatively young in their process of becoming academic writers, would probably be very guarded about what words they can use and what words they can't use. I mean I know that, as an undergraduate and as a post-graduate, I've used some pretty scary language in my time, and I got written notes like, you can't say that. But you can. You can say that actually. Em,

TOM: And you're up against editors, who are going to accept or reject your article.

LAWRENCE: Right, yes.

TOM: And these days when . . . It always scares me now when an editor now, and this is happening more and more, asks for key words. I know that happens in the social sciences more than in the humanities, but it's happening more and more. And they reduce your, what you've done, to a list of key words. And it just really gets me.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

TOM: But it's indicative, I think, of the problem.

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TOM: You know, and it's hard, it's hard when you're first getting started as a writer, trying to break into that, because you do have to behave in a certain way, you have to speak the house language.

LAWRENCE: Right. Yeah. So you graduated past that.

TOM: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: Yes. Good for you. Alright. That's part of your development as well. I guess one more question is that, you've spent a lot of time with architects, your daughter, I didn't realise that your daughter is an architect as well, or an architect student?

TOM: Architect. A working architect.

LAWRENCE: OK. And, em, I'm wondering, just like in terms of the process that you saw with the painters and the way that the painters talked to you about your writing, is there anything that you're learning from architects that has relevance to your writing?

TOM: Yeah, well like I said, I think that the three-dimensionality, the fact that, that architects are working in a sense that's both linear and spatial at the same time, and that it requires words, but also it requires visualisation.

LAWRENCE: Is there space in your paper? Like in other words, are you looking at your paper as having space? Is there a spatial dimension to your paper when you're writing?

TOM: Yeah, yeah, I think there is. I'm not sure if I think of it that way but it, yeah, I guess . . . the beginning, middle and end has changed, from a line to a series of interlocking spaces, or like, you know, what are those circles that overlap with each other

LAWRENCE: Concentricity. Concentric circles.

TOM: There is a mathematical term for that. Yeah.

LAWRENCE: OK. Just something to think about.

TOM: And I always like it when I get to that last space, which is, you know, home again.

LAWRENCE: Good for you, yeah. When everything kind of fits together at that point.

TOM: Yeah, but again, trying to end it without sounding like you're ending it.

LAWRENCE: Right. OK.

TOM: It's always a little fun thing to do at the end.

LAWRENCE: Fair enough. Good stuff. Well let me open up, em, the questions to the floor. Please, I would, you know, would somebody like to ask a question of Tom? Something that you'd like to know about his process? Someone?

QUESTIONER: I'd like to ask you. You just briefly touched upon ending, and spoke about anxiety at the beginning. How do you end things, and how do you know it's finished?

TOM: That's a really good question. Yeah. I mean in a sense it's like cutting a rope here and saying, OK, this is it. OK. I'll get to that, but it also has to do with writing conference papers, the famous 20 minute paper, 10 pages. You know, that thing. You can't say everything you want to say in 10 pages and so it's much better trying to simply say one thing. So it's a matter of carving one little bit out of that whole, that bucket of ideas. So, in a sense, any piece written, short, medium or long, is only part of something bigger. And I think I've had to get used to the fact that nothing ever really ends. So maybe that's made me relax more about an ending. Em, another way of answering that is that, I think with any given project that there's finally a point of exhaustion. I've said what I have to say about this. If I'm going to say any more I'm gonna have to go away and start thinking all over again and reading all over again. So, so there's that. And I kind of know that I'm there. But then it's also what I was just saying to Lawrence, that there's a way of trying to end it without sounding like you're ending it. And I guess what I try to do is wrap it up, but without going through that kind of mechanical thing of saying, in this paper I have just done x, y and z and just try and make a passing summary, and open it somehow at the end, and maybe that gets back to the utopia thing . . .

QUESTIONER: Yeah.

TOM: . . . to end with either questions, or new material or some kind of opening. I also tend to begin, and this is my insecurity, I tend to begin pieces of writing, and more and more end pieces of writing, with quotations or poetry from other people. I use them as my crutch to start, but it's also become a way of ending something. I just . . . I'm working on an essay on Aldous Huxley right now and I end the essay with 10 lines from Mathew Arnold's *Dover Beach*. I don't end on my words. And maybe that's my own reticence again. I don't know if that answers it.

QUESTIONER: Thank you.

LAWRENCE: What you say about that open space at the end is kind of, you know how people love to fill openings? If you make a space they'll fill it.

TOM: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: You know, it's almost like a compulsion like, and so in a way, that's a really attractive way of keeping the conversation going. If you can leave an opening, and people feel compelled to fill it, it's like they're just starting it all over again.

TOM: Yeah. In the eighteenth or nineteenth century we would say, what do you, dear reader, think?

LAWRENCE: We need to get back to that, yeah.

TOM: We had a hole for the reader to fall into. To think about.

LAWRENCE: OK. Somebody else? Come on people. Sarah?

QUESTIONER: Tom, I'm interested in the bigger projects, like the book, in particular, your books. Em, how do you actually face into something like that and to make a start at that at all, because you know, in my position, just doing a PhD, it seems enormous, so enormous that it can be very off-putting sometimes. And, em, I can make notes on specific things, but tying them together just terrifies me so much that you almost delay it. How do you actually get stuck in and start?

TOM: Yeah. It's true for a book as it is for an essay. Think of it as pieces rather than the whole. I mean, there is a point where you have to, at the beginning, you have to think of it as a whole. You have a topic. You have an idea. And you're going to spend 200 pages developing that idea. In a sense that's a real gift. I mean that's one thing, is to think about the book as a gift, that you're not constrained to a mere thirty pages. You can actually waffle on for two hundred. You know, so you have all this room. So that's a good thing. But then, to break it up and to do it in pieces, to think of each chapter as a separate piece, em, and I know some people may argue against that, but I would say, do the pieces and then pull the transitions through. So there's a stage of writing the individual components and then there's the stage of pulling the idea through and, you know, making those links and transitions. Because if you think of the thing as a whole, and if you try to keep that in your mind, you'll never do anything. It's just so crippling. At least that's what I find.

QUESTIONER: Another question about transitions. There's so many things that ring true, or make so much sense, when you said about the idea of transition, when you're trying to do something like writing and teaching at the same time, and that you need time to gear the head into the different zone kind of thing, and you have two or three days, if you're lucky enough to have those two or three days. But if you don't have those two or three days, do you think there is a gap of time after which it becomes more like a big start up engine, you know like, would you think there would be ideally that you should get up every morning and write for half an hour and then have breakfast and start your normal day. Or, that's not long enough to . . .

TOM: I think that's a personal thing. There are people who can do that, who write every day. My friend Mary [inaudible], in Madison, you know, is a brilliant and competent person, somebody who works in Arabic, French and Japanese. She commands three different language groups. She's amazing. But she's up writing every day at 5 o'clock. And she writes from 5 to 7. And you'll hear professional writers say that they do that. But I can't do that. I can't function at 5. But I couldn't do it every day. I sort of like the bursts. So what I do is look for gaps and spaces. But, in a way, these days, if I get a good morning in, if I can start writing at 9, and write till 12, then in a sense I have the rest of the day, because there's no way I can spend a whole day writing any more. Maybe I used to, eh, feel I had to. But I don't know, I think it's a personal thing. Which do you do? Can you work every day?

QUESTIONER: Blanket days, no. Just a couple of days. And then you're always waiting for that . . .

TOM: . . . to find it, yeah. No, I mean it used to drive my daughters crazy, because they were little kids and they'd be looking forward to a weekend off, you know, and I was co-parenting, so I'd have them on a certain weekend. So what I would do is I'd spend my on-weekends with them but in my off weekends, which were mine, basically from Thursday night to Monday morning, I'd just block it. And write. Which means you don't have a life. But you get writing done.

LAWRENCE: You had said something earlier about the fact that the night before, you set it up for the next day. You couldn't possibly write every day if you did that. You wouldn't sleep. Because you wake up in the middle of the night and you're making notes. You must lose a lot of sleep when you do that.

TOM: My happiest times writing is when I'd have something like 2 or 3 weeks, and there have been moments, and you just turn into a starling . . .

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TOM: . . . and recluse . . .

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

TOM: . . . em, because your day is exactly that. And you guys who work twenty-four hours in architecture, I think you understand this in a way that the rest of us don't, because we pamper ourselves. But, you know, to sort of get up and do that writing first thing, and then to move into an editing mode, and then to move into an editing and polishing mode in the evening, and then plan, and then go to sleep and be restless, and you're spending your night dreaming and thinking and waking up and writing notes, and then . . . that's a cycle, I can sustain that for 10 days to two weeks.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TOM: You know. Stop shaving, stop washing, stop talking to human beings.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

TOM: But a huge chunk of work gets done and then that can be worked with and edited and played with afterward, and the more time the better. But usually it's 2 or 3 days. Like I've just come off a week of writing this Huxley essay. I hid out for a week. And it's only ten pages but it was driving me nuts having to it. But I finally broke the back of it.

LAWRENCE: Mmm. Cool, yeah. And you get to the point where it's ready to go. Yeah, it's great. Some other questions?

QUESTIONER: Tom, when you were writing your PhD and teaching at the same time, how did you balance that?

TOM: Eh, writing my PhD, teaching, co-parenting two kids and being incredibly politically active, so I was fitting it in with all of that. It was this thing I was talking about with Ann. It's a matter of stealing days and stealing weeks. I don't know what spring break or spring vacation is. I mean every, every spring it would be a magical 10 days. January would be a magical month and then there would be summer. But because my daughters and I travelled, just hung out in our van every summer, you know, I'd maybe write for a month and then we'd hit the road. So, it's finding chunks.

QUESTIONER: I was afraid you'd say that.

TOM: And getting that creative writing done in the chunks, but then for the editing I could tinker. You know, I could play with the prose, and do the work citing and put in the quotes and do a lot of the kind of . . .

QUESTIONER: Did you find it difficult to get your head from the one subject into the other subject? Because I'm having huge difficulty, eh, teaching on a module, and then moving back into something that's completely unrelated in my PhD.

TOM: It's the hardest thing, you know, to, to . . . and it loses you a day. There's a day of real anxiety because you're teaching Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. And you think, OK, Friday morning I've got to start writing. But you get nothing done on the Friday. That's why my plants are so healthy. [laughter] You know. That's why in the States I got so good at watching daytime soap operas.

QUESTIONER: So procrastination is not unusual?

TOM: No. Because it's all happening. And finally there's a kind of, there's a kind of, of a Tai Chi to it. Em, something's happening during that time when nothing's happening. You know, the gears are changing, and it's a matter of finally relaxing and going with it and realising that's part of the process. And doing as much as you can during that change-over day to take notes and diddle and fiddle and do whatever. And then, really force yourself on Saturday morning. Beat yourself up.

QUESTIONER: Well, it's nice to hear that I'm normal and now I have to go teach on Saturdays. [laughter]

LAWRENCE: Somebody else folks?

QUESTIONER: I'm just so happy to hear you say that about the transition day, because I find that em, I also teach, and I'm trying to complete a PhD. But I find that pro . . . what I was just considering as procrastination, I would have been [inaudible] consumed with guilt that I was getting nothing done on that first day, and I also find that I spend so much time editing instead of actually putting down real thoughts, you know?

TOM: Well, there's two things there. I mean, one, going back to the different roles. I talked before about being a writer and then being an editor. But being a teacher is a very public thing. You know, we're out there, we're dealing with other people, or being anything. And then writing is such a private thing. At least initially, at that level. So, that's a huge personality shift, you know, and it's a bit like being a super hero. You know, you sort of go from being the average person to superman or the hulk, and I think writing is more like going to be a hulk. Eh, it's that kind of anti-social figure. But that takes time. You know, we can't just press our writing personality button and do it. So, so learning, like I said, how to go with the movement of that, and finding strategies to sort of creatively spend your time while you're dithering, em, is useful. But, but, the 'too much editing': I don't think there's ever anything such as too much editing. It's carving out that time to do the initial creative work, but editing works really well in the nooks and crannies of everyday life. You can do that. Yeah. I think that's a good thing.

QUESTIONER: Just a very interesting discussion and I could relate to some of the things you had said, eh, about switching off and, em, you know, writing during the night. I've done that myself. Sometimes you just cannot, you know, you don't stop during the daytime and have that projected time or thinking time, and I've done that a lot of times, you know. And having those sticky notes at the bedside table and just getting up and, you know, I can do this, I'm going to write this, you know, putting the ideas there, and working on them, you know, on the following day, or days.

So that's one thing, I just, I think it works sometimes. And sometimes, in terms of how people write, you actually, I became nocturnal. I was totally working during the nights for my PhD. All night, till sunrise. And then switch off. So that's how I finished my PhD writing. And interestingly, when I submitted my PhD, I was told to make a presentation on my PhD, to defend my PhD work, and defend my thesis. So, I was wondering why I was made do that, because it wasn't a usual thing to do in that department. And I wasn't sure but I think I find, because I teach, I thought I'll be OK, I'll do that. So I was told I'd passed. But then I was, I had big questions, and big chunks to rewrite in my thesis. And I thought, what is this? Because they wanted to see, I could say a lot of things much more easily and, you know, express myself much more easily, than put them in the right words. So I could relate to some of your, yeah, you know there's individual differences how you can work best and how you can apply yourself best.

TOM: Yeah that's the other thing we were talking about, I was talking about writing first thing in the morning, or writing in chunks. But the other sort of person is the one who writes at

night. I couldn't do that. I would be completely wiped out by then. But some people really get going around midnight.

QUESTIONER: You get forced to do it sometimes.

TOM: And it works.

QUESTIONER: And sometimes you have no choice if you have four children.

TOM: Yeah. But the other thing about, you know, the Viva and revisions and such, that's, you know, that's part of the apprenticeship in the nature of doing academic writing, you know. Your committee finds holes in what you do and you've got to then fill them in. You know that can be constructive. Sometimes it can really be destructive and I think being an external examiner myself, you have to be really careful examining someone's PhD to offer a criticism that helps it grow, rather than one that just attacks it. It's, it's a powerful position and you can really destroy somebody.

QUESTIONER: Could I ask another questions, sorry, it's just about the Dragon software. It sounds fascinating really.

TOM: Yeah. The Dragon.

QUESTIONER: And, em, I'm just wondering in terms of, maybe this is a visual thing, but for me I like to see the words physically as they are on the page, but I also imagine that's a very, em, you know, you might start faster if you were to speak what it is that is in your head as opposed to the maybe slightly slower process of writing it. But does it change that, when you actually visually see the thing that you've written, written through what you said, when you're . . . I suppose that process of editing, is that process of editing quite different, or is a lot more refinement needed in terms of the way that you're writing?

TOM: I'm not sure if I completely understand.

QUESTIONER: OK. Sorry. Em, it was a long-winded question.

Idé O'Sullivan (IO'S): I guess what you're saying is . . .

QUESTIONER: I like the way the words might like look on the page . . .

TOM: Yeah.

QUESTIONER: . . . like the way a sentence might look on the page, or whatever, when you actually see it.

TOM: Yeah.

QUESTIONER: If you're writing it out you see it. But if you're speaking it out you don't see that. So it's more like your thinking . . .

TOM: OK. I get you. In a sense this takes us back to it being spatial . . . When using the Dragon, and if I'm talking, the words are appearing on the screen.

QUESTIONER: Oh, I see.

TOM: You know, it's just that what's missing is the hand, the hand to page. So you're actually making the words happen.

QUESTIONER: OK.

TOM: And you see. And then you can tell the Dragon to cut back and you start to use certain voice commands to cut that last line or start again. So, it's actually happening.

QUESTIONER: So it's emerging. It's not a thing that . . .

TOM: No, and in fact, I find that it's, it's smoother. And also being, because of my hands causing so many typos, if I were to type a page every word would be misspelt. Because if I'm really thinking fast, then I'm typing fast. And I can type very fast and very inaccurately. But what happens when I talk it, is that the words come out right. And they're looser. They're more me.

LAWRENCE: There's an interesting dynamic . . .

TOM: It's a great system. Try it.

LAWRENCE: There's an interesting dynamic in the Writing Centre, with native, native speakers, people who speak English as a first language, oftentimes can't see, they look at the page and they can't see that there's grammatical errors, or there's structural errors in the

sentence level. But when they read it out loud they can hear it. So there's probably something happening, like for instance in the use of the Dragon, when you hear yourself say it, you say it probably much more eloquently, much more grammatically correctly, em, the structure, if you find yourself running out of breath, you're probably rephrasing it, so that it doesn't, it isn't a sentence that's so long that you ran out of breath. I'm sure a lot of those kinds of things would happen.

TOM: That's, that's actually true. Of course, when I revise, and I'm reading this at night, I read it aloud.

LAWRENCE: Right. Yes.

TOM: You know. That's always a way to catch things.

LAWRENCE: That's a good practice.

TOM: But I do think you might have something in the original moment too.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

TOM: Yeah. Because your own rhythms create the sentence.

LAWRENCE: Sure. Yeah. What sounds right. You know. And usually you have a good sense of what sounds right. You might not have a sense of what looks right, but you sure have a sense of what sounds right.

TOM: I heard Alan Ginsberg once talk about, about the length of a line of poetry, and he said, you know, his poems have long lines, because he's such a big guy with a big set of lungs. [laughter] You know, and his poetry would be spoken, whereas Fred Gary Snyder would speak in little chunks. [laughter] So, there's no semi-colons in my speaking. [laughter]

LAWRENCE: Do you enunciate the pronunciation, I'm sorry . . .

TOM: With the Dragon? Yeah. You have to tell it.

LAWRENCE: Oh do you, yeah? Full stop!

TOM: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: You say that. Yeah. Oh that's a riot.

TOM: Sometimes it hears me wrong and an 'exclamation point' becomes an 'explanation point'.
[laughter] Also, Dragon will not use curse words.

LAWRENCE: Oh!

TOM: I've tried to teach it but it won't do it.

LAWRENCE: Oh, that's it! [laughter] Maybe you're not using the right curse words.
[laughter]

TOM: But you can train it. You download all your . . . it will go through all your files and copy all your words and all your vocabulary, so it learns your language,

LAWRENCE: Mmm.

TOM: . . . and it starts to learn your spoken language, so it actually grows with you. It does, it does have a life of its own.

LAWRENCE: Right. Do you have a name for your Dragon?

TOM: Dragon.

LAWRENCE: Right. Just Dragon.

TOM: Puff. [laughter]

LAWRENCE: Was there any . . . we have time for another question. Is there another question? Anybody else like to ask a question?

QUESTIONER: Can I . . .

LAWRENCE: Please, please.

QUESTIONER: One thing that I was thrilled to hear you talk about was imposter syndrome. You know, it's something that I struggle with the whole time. I have been told in the past by

other well established academics not to talk about it at my stage. You know, that once you've been in the game for a very long time you can afford to be honest but, you know, in the early days, keep it quiet. Em, and I find that very hard to do. So, em, do you think it's kind of OK to talk to people about these things or am I shooting myself in the foot by being, you know, straight about the struggles and how hard it can be sometimes.

TOM: I'd, be honest, would be my feeling.

QUESTIONER: I can't seem to help it but I don't know if I'm, you know . . .

TOM: I mean, you know, saying that, it . . . life is tough out there and you have to watch who you work with and how you do things, of course, so . . . keep an eye over your shoulder. But no, I mean, you know, that's life.

IO'S: In a lot of our consultations with students we encourage them to be honest about those feelings . . . and to hear them, and to realise that you're not alone in that feeling and that others, even well established writers, experience those same feelings.

TOM: Yeah.

IO'S: And there's comfort in that. I think.

QUESTIONER: Definitely. Yeah.

LAWRENCE: OK. I guess, one quick question. Em, something that you had said in the pub, em, a couple of weeks ago, about deadlines being a motivator. Can you just elaborate on that a little bit?

TOM: Yeah. There are people who work up to a deadline and who are wonderfully inspired by that. That would scare the hell out of me. I would never expose myself by working up to a deadline. I am really, I have to, you know, be done, at least two weeks in advance. So then, I can then edit and polish, and do this, and do this, and be sure, whether it's for a conference paper – usually a conference paper, because that means a public performance . . .

LAWRENCE: Mmm.

TOM: . . . em, and I would never take the risk of writing up to the deadline. I had a colleague; she would bring her laptop, I think they had them then, to the conference with her and she'd be

writing up until the moment she gave the paper. I would, I would be in bits. I couldn't do it. So, I'm not one of those people. I'm not a journalist. My daughter's a journalist and she can work to a deadline and it works for her. I can't do that. I need to really have it done and then have a lot of time to tinker.

LAWRENCE: Right. That's a real revision thing, being able to re-see the paper, rethink the paper. Yeah.

TOM: Because I also have a habit of using the same words over and over and over again, so I'm a great fan of doing word searches and getting rid of repeating words . . .

LAWRENCE: Right. Yeah.

TOM: . . . so I really fine tune. I don't like deadlines. Who does?

LAWRENCE: Great stuff. Well, we're out of time. Tom, thank you a million. Thank you very much. [Applause] You can really sell tickets. I'm going to tell you right now.

TOM: Does this sound familiar?

LAWRENCE: This is like the best response we've had so far. And on a Friday. I really didn't expect that to happen on a Friday. It's amazing. That's brilliant. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for coming and thank you for bringing attention to writing at the university. I appreciate it. Thank you. Cheers. OK folks. Cheers.