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Taste Of Pity: Christopher Nolan (1965-2009)

Christopher Nolan was asphyxiated at birth and the lack of oxygen led to him being born with severe disabilities: he was unable to walk, use his arms or hands and unable to talk. He made violent jerking movements with his useless limbs and with his head and neck. He was, in a sense, imprisoned in his own body. As Christopher later wrote, he was *trapped in a nightmare*. An early diagnosis by a specialist in cerebral palsy predicted that he would remain in an infantile condition for the rest of his, presumably, short life.

However, his parents were convinced that inside the crippled and distorted body and behind the animal-like noises their son emitted was a sensitive, intelligent human being. With their help, Christopher developed a means of communicating with his eyes which was the only part of his body which was under his control. He seemed to respond to the sound and rhythm of words and his father who had a great love of literature would read passages for James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and D.H. Lawrence to stimulate his son's mind. Christopher seemed especially responsive to passages of Joyce's *Ulysses* with its extraordinary verbal gymnastics. His mother strung the letters of the alphabet all around the kitchen walls and Christopher would indicate by gazing at each letter in turn to make up words. His sister, Yvonne would sing songs to her brother and act out sketches for his instruction and amusement.

His family were determined that

Christopher should experience as much as he could by letting him stroke animals, including, in the later words of Christopher *feel the cold nervous heartbeat of a frog*; go horseback riding and take trips to the seaside to feel his body washed by waves and feel the warm sand beneath his feet.

Although the family lived on a farm in Mullingar in Ireland, for the sake of their son's education, they moved to Dublin. It was here that Christopher attended the remedial school which dealt with children who were at that time classified as *spastics*. At the age of ten, Christopher's life was partially transformed by a new drug called *Lioresal* which helped to relax the violent movements of his neck for brief periods of time. He was fitted with a sort of unicorn stick which was attached to his forehead and this enabled him to slowly strike the keys of a typewriter to form words. The drug alone wasn't sufficient for him to type so his mother would hold her cupped hands under his chin. Each word would take an average of ten to fifteen minutes to type. In the first letter he was ever able to write, he describes to his aunt and uncle the effect of this drug on his life:



I bet you never thought that you would be hearing from me! Aunt Eve and Uncle Joe, roughly three weeks ago I was put on a new drug called Lioresal, it is an anti-spastic drug. I find it wonderful.

that I would be able to write to you was beyond my wildest dreams. The drug relaxes my muscles even when I am typing.

You were great to think of me all over the years since I was born. Having Mass said for me at Bethlehem rewarded me through the hard times I remember. I wish to thank you both.

The only poet whose work Christopher was familiar with was the anguished Jesuit priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins and his use of alliteration, compound words and sprung rhythms can be seen and heard in Christopher's poetry. He told his mother that he had been writing poems in his head since the age of three. As a magpie likes to bring back shiny objects to its nest, Christopher would store exotic and archaic words in his mind because he relished the taste and sound of them. If he couldn't find exactly the verbal sound he wanted, he had no hesitation in inventing words of his own.

Now that he had found a means of expressing himself for the first time in his shuttered life, poems, letters, sketches and fragments of autobiography flooded out of him. At the age of just fifteen, these writings were collected and published and it was appropriately entitled **Dam-Burst Of Dreams**.

One of his earliest poems written aged eleven is called **I Peer Through Ugliness** which contains the following footnote: *I wrote the above poem because every day I realized more and more how handicapped I was.*

*Years dead tears, peter down my face,
Lucifer quietly plays me down,
Out of light there came Christ Divine,
Peace always comes, reigns awhile.
Day after dawn, raw quiet rested there,
As I peered through pastures,
Dew drops glistened in golden buttercups.*

Although born into a devout Catholic family, it would be a mistake to think that Christopher bowed meekly before God, accepting his disabilities. In one of the best-known passages of his award-winning autobiography entitled *Under The Eye Of The Clock*, he describes how one day of extreme exasperation at his condition, he demanded that his father push his wheelchair into a cathedral and up next to an image of the Crucifixion and signalled to Christ to *fuck off*.

Those experiences which his parents allowed their son to have come alive again in his poems such as the following which describes the holiday in the beautiful Beara peninsula on the south-west of Ireland. In Christopher's mind, nothing was lost.

from On Remembering The Beara Landscape

*,
Along lonely laneways speeding,
A herd of cattle steaming,
Which brought us to a halt.
A paper passed on an ethereal,
rapier-like wind,
A song bird flew on fiery wing,
Over hill and dale clouds
billowed,
Dancing the dance of golden
dreams.*

In his poem, *Could You*, he conveys the sense of liberation which being able to write has given him but with this freedom comes the responsibility to use each word, however seemingly strange, with power and precision and a certain grandeur. He is

speaking out just for himself but all those millions of people all over the world who are trapped inside their terrible handicaps and who have been dismissed as being a mere burden on society. He gives voice to the rich inner life behind the mask of disability.

from *Could You*

*... My harried brain leaned
Downward on my chest, thinking, memorizing,
Repeating, listening in my ear for the
Effect of my words. I realized my munificence
Of knowledge. I endangered my freedom
Of expression, if I did not disembowel
My notorious madness, in impeccable
Language, agonizingly written in numerous
Tantalizing, spasmodic-ridden onslaughts,
On a rickety, moaning typewriter.*

After leaving the remedial school, his parents decided to send their son to an ordinary comprehensive school. He was at first mocked and bullied by the able bodied pupils but gradually came to be accepted. An article, including some of Christopher's poems, was published in *The Times* and a computer scientist from Edinburgh University suggested that a micro-computer might make communication a less painstaking process. A *Sunday Times* appeal was set up to enable the Nolan family to buy this expensive piece of technology. Forty thousand pounds was raised and the surplus money was used to set up a charitable trust to help other severely disabled children. The computer allowed Christopher to be less reliant on his mother in order to write. He enrolled as a student at Trinity College, Dublin but didn't complete his degree. He left in order to write a novel entitled *The Banyan Tree* which is based on his family's farming background. It took him ten years to write this novel filled with a Joycean intoxication of language.

He was working on another novel at the time of his death. One of the many dangers of his condition was the possibility that he might choke when he was swallowing food and at the age of forty-three, he choked to death when eating a piece of salmon. In an ambitious poem

written when he was fourteen, he depicts each month of the year and each month represents the first twelve years of his life. During his difficult birth when he came so close to death, January is described as a winter wasteland with *Numb snow mush on moon-tide line*.

But when he reaches the month of October, there is wonderfully Keatsian sensuousness and richness and a deep sense of acceptance for all that he has lived through.

October

*Beautifully mellow, oven-like nuts,
cooked
Brown-ripe all summer long,
centuries -
Coined, small kernel-assimilations,
cement-hard shells cream-tipping
life,
Always cementing veal-tender
dreams -
Peacefully encased within
October's
Autumnal, closetted, cloistered
granary.*

One of the first poems he wrote was called *My Ambitions*:

*Taste of pity as people stare,
Love, lots of love from mother,
Pills you find as lasting prayer,
An irate person may possibly
Have faith, instead of despair.*