

## A portrait of the artist:

### Homer and Milton's affliction

In March 1970 I spent part of my elective period of study away from London at the Rotunda Maternity Hospital in Dublin. This somehow gave me the incentive to read James Joyce's *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Nearly 50 years flash by and I return to Dublin and visit the Dublin Writers Museum on Parnell Square. The Rotunda Hospital is nearby. So too is Belvedere College where Joyce had such an excellent classical education. My interest in Joyce is awakened. I want to know why his eyes caused him so much misery and feel I must try to finish reading *Ulysses*.

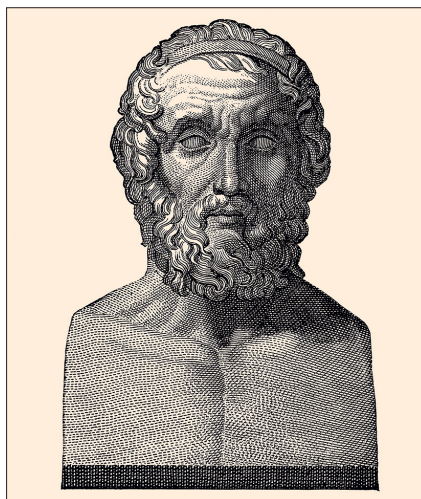
#### STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS, EPIPHANIES, AND SYMBOLISM

What a strange experience to re-read Joyce after such a long time. The love of atmosphere and storyline has perhaps waned but it has been replaced by more biographical knowledge and a reading of the critics. Passage of time can reveal new areas of significance. All those years ago I was aware of the stream of consciousness but not of Joyce's other techniques, such as his introduction of an epiphany into a story. I was not aware of the impact of symbolism, for instance in his sublime short story 'The Dead', which reads: '... *the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead*' as if through a time-space veil.<sup>1</sup>

*Ulysses* stamped Joyce's arrival into the world of literary modernism. This circadian novel is loosely interwoven with Homer's *The Odyssey*. Here he was able to use a whole variety of writing styles to demonstrate his single-minded genius and virtuosity.

#### JOYCE'S EYE AFFLICTION

Joyce's eyes make a fascinating subject for any budding ophthalmologist and they also chart the eye treatment available in



An illustration of the ancient Greek author Homer, the 'blind bard'.

the early part of the 20th century in Europe. Hyperopia and not myopia, as quoted by his biographers, was the first of his problems as a child.<sup>2-4</sup> In adult life, Joyce had recurrent discomfort from frequent bouts of iritis with no effective treatment other than cold compresses, leeches, and morphine (steroids arrived in the 1940s). Speculation suggests a wide range of diagnoses from syphilis to reactive arthritis. Surgical intervention followed with iridectomies, sphincterotomy, capsulectomy, and removal of cataracts.<sup>4</sup> The end result was virtual blindness. Perhaps it was a coincidence that he admired the writing of Homer who just happened to be, by legend, a blind bard. Lucia (Saint Lucy, also known as Saint Lucia), the patron saint of the blind, was a name specifically chosen for his daughter. TS Eliot claimed that Joyce's auditory imagination was sharpened at the expense of the visual. *Ulysses* and *Paradise Lost* have been described as works where sounds are important.<sup>1</sup>

An alternative view is that Joyce still

had strong powers of visual retention and imagination not dulled by deteriorating vision.<sup>5</sup> Joyce himself described his eye as 'the broken window of his soul'.<sup>6</sup>

#### FOUR MASTERPIECES AND LITERARY IMMORTALITY

In 1904 Joyce eloped to the continent with his wife-to-be, a chambermaid from Galway, Nora Barnacle. The marriage endured and they had two children. Time was spent in a peripatetic life between Trieste, Paris, and Zürich. What followed were years of hardship and difficulty getting editors to publish his work. He fought back with his pen and was rescued by patrons. *Finnegans Wake*, his last work, was completed in 1939. Joyce died in 1941, at the age of 58, following surgery for a perforated stomach ulcer in Zürich. Writing four masterpieces in his lifetime has brought him literary immortality.

In September 2019, the new Museum of Literature of Ireland (MoLI) on St Stephen's Green was opened. It contains the first copy of *Ulysses* and Joyce's notebooks.

Reading Joyce has been a fascinating journey that simply does not seem to end.

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