Lucia Joyce: To Dance in the Wake
by Carol Loeb Shloss

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The life of Lucia Joyce, so Carol Loeb Shloss tells us, "is a story that was not supposed to be told." (p. 11) In her attempts to recount the tale of James Joyce's troubled daughter, Shloss met many obstacles, chief among them, she implies, the remaining members of the immediate Joyce family, and particularly Joyce's grandson, Stephen, "the very person who ... decided that [Lucia's] story should remain buried in the dark cellars of 'family privacy'." (p. 455) It was Stephen Joyce who in 1992 persuaded the National Library of Ireland to allow him to remove from the James Joyce-Paul Léon papers, which were about to be opened to the public, a substantial number of letters relating to his aunt. Already Stephen Joyce had destroyed Lucia's letters to him, and had persuaded Samuel Beckett to do likewise. Most importantly, in the early 1980s he had taken possession of a trunkful of Joyce papers, including many letters from Joyce to his daughter, which have never come to light – and never will, it would seem, given Stephen Joyce's fierce determination to safeguard the privacy of his grandparents and of his father, and to suppress, as Shloss would have it, the sad history of his Aunt Lucia. No wonder that Shloss when she took on the task of writing Lucia's biography should have felt "as if I had walked into a small disaster zone." (p. 28)

It is ironic that the long introduction, "What Happened to Lucia Joyce?", relating the author's travails in researching her subject, should be the most absorbing chapter in the book. Shloss presents herself as a cross between a private detective engaged in a search for a missing person, and the foster parent whom, had she been available and had he been wise enough, Joyce would have appointed to look after his daughter and preserve her memory. She has been inventive and resourceful, not to say cunning, in her investigations: though muffled in academic tones, there is a note of triumphal glee in her account of how she outwitted the Joyce family censors by tracing Lucia's years of treatment in various European mental institutions through the medical bills which Paul Léon[1] had saved. As she admits, however, the paucity of primary sources meant that she "had to construct the context of Lucia's experiences and then put her into them," so that "the Lucia who is presented here is almost totally refracted through the eyes of others." (p. 32) All the same, despite what she describes as "generations of censorship", she has managed to paint a remarkably detailed portrait of Joyce's unfortunate "Lucylight", as he dubs her in *Finnegans Wake*, and in the process has produced a

sharply perceptive and disturbing meditation on the terrible price that great art often levies not only on the artist but on those closest to him.

The question remains, and it is a difficult one, as to whether Lucia Joyce merits such a lavish portrayal. Lucia liked to tease her father that her fame as a dancer would one day set her in the newspaper headlines above him – the notion was encouraged by an interviewer for a Paris newspaper in 1928 who declared: "When she reaches her full capacity for rhythmic dancing, James Joyce may yet be known as his daughter's father" (p. 152) – and throughout the years of her early adulthood she saw herself in spirited though loving competition with the world-famous author of *Ulysses*. There are many moments in Shloss's book when she seems to believe that the Parisian interviewer's prophecy would have come true were it not for the machinations of Joyce's family and protectors. But despite Shloss's insistence on Lucia's artistic gifts, the evidence she so earnestly adduces only serves to indicate that had she not been the daughter of a great literary figure, poor Lucia would by now be forgotten, along with so many other "rhythmic dancers" of the period.

The other part of Shloss's argument, that "Joyce's daughter may have had problems, but she was no lunatic," (p. 31) and that she was, in effect, sacrificed for the sake of a book, is hard to refute, although that is not to say it is incapable of refutation. Referring to an account of a visit to Lucia by a friend of her childhood, Dominique Maroger, in 1980, two years before Lucia's death, Shloss sets out her own case:

> [Maroger's] explanatory scheme was a simple one: "Joyce was lacking the calm needed to finish *Finnegans Wake*. The constant scandals that his daughter fomented within the house rendered that task impossible. The novelist installed her straightaway in London," in the homes of numerous friends, with [his long-time patron] Harriet Weaver, and finally with his family in Ireland. When she left the beaten path, becoming a fugitive, "in Paris the idea blossomed that she could be arrested and officially interned." (p. 419)

And this, with the collusion, according to Shloss, of Lucia's mother and brother, and Joyce intimates such as Maria Jolas, is exactly what happened. As Shloss remarks of Jolas, one of her more egregious villains, she "looked over the Joyces' emotional shoulders and decided that a book was more important than a girl's life." (p. 255)

From the outset the auguries for Lucia were not good. When she was born, in a pauper's ward of the Ospidale Civico in Trieste, in July 1907, her parents were living the rackety life of penurious expatriates; her mother told one of her Triestine friends that the child had been born "almost in the street." (p. 38) The name that her father chose for her was associated not only with light and vision but was also, as Shloss wryly notes, the name of the mad heroine of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, as the opera-loving Joyce would have been well aware.

It had been a hard pregnancy. Nora Joyce, a country girl from County Galway, had still not reconciled herself to exile after nearly three years in Europe. At the best of times she was no homemaker, and these were not the best of times. The couple, who already had a two-year-old son, were existing largely on the charity of James's long-suffering brother Stanislaus, also exiled in Trieste; James was out of work, scraping a few schillings from odd bits of journalism and private language lessons. Nora's health was poor: as Joyce wrote to Stanislaus, in unwittingly prophetic mode, the child she was carrying was "an unforgettable part of the problem." (p. 41) The wet heat of the Triestine summer was a torment for a young woman about to come to term. To make matters worse, Joyce himself was ill with rheumatic fever, and indeed when Nora went into labour, her husband was a patient in the same hospital.

All was not misery, however. At her birth, Shloss reminds us,

> Lucia entered into a life that was rich in counterpoint, woven from the strands of rebellion, optimism, volatile high spirits, and sheer, brazen talent that had brought her parents from Ireland to Europe. It was a loquacious, opinionated life that was filled with music, books, potatoes, cabbages, Irish bacon, polenta, colorful conversation, and a lackadaisical attention to custom. Poverty competed with extravagance in the household of her parents, sober realities with lavish drink, and father and mother both called upon luck to soften the blows of fate. (p. 39-40)

The early years in Trieste drew Lucia into what Shloss calls "the erotic dimension of her parents' lives." (p. 59) Like many bohemian young couples with no money and too many babies, the Joyces developed roving eyes. Joyce flirted, harmlessly, it would seem, with his private language students, while Nora "got embroiled", as Shloss puts it, with a young, and married, Venetian aristocrat named Prezioso, whose "visits with Nora in the Joyces' flat were initially clouded with ambiguity." (p. 60) Joyce seems to have been complaisant, or more than complaisant, in the matter; as his letters and his fictions show, he had a streak of masochism in his nature, and liked to play with the darkly exciting prospect of sexual betrayal – consider Leopold Bloom's ambiguous attitude to Molly's affair with Blazes Boylan, and the sticky humiliations he suffers in the Nighttown chapter.

Shloss raises the temperature significantly by glossing Joyce's sensual reveries on nameless young women in his secret journal, posthumously published as *Giacomo Joyce*, with his burgeoning absorption in his young daughter, noting that he recycled images from the journal of flower, lover and child as the basis for the poem "A Flower Given to My Daughter" in *Pomes Penyeach* (1927). This is the first glimpse of a shy, dark beastie which will poke its proboscis repeatedly out of the hot undergrowth of Shloss's book – *Finnegans Wake* has much punning fun with insect/incest, and both words prefigure some of the deeper themes of the book – and which we suspect might

have been freed to scuttle all over the pages had the Joycean censors allowed. In the summer of 1917, when Nora had gone with the children to London to recover from what seems to have been a minor nervous breakdown, we read her reporting to Joyce in her idiosyncratic, Molly Bloomesque fashion how twelve-year-old Giorgio and ten-year-old Lucia spend their mornings wrestling in bed: "I havent any trouble with them except in the morning before they get up its a regular game with them they have a boxing match in the bed and of course I have to pull the two of them out on the floor Georgie is very shy he is afraid of his life I might see his prick so that he rolls himself up in the quilt." (p. 69) Hmm.

There is no doubt that James Joyce's immediate family had, like every family, its secrets, its silences. Shloss, although she never says so directly, seems to believe, or at least to suspect strongly, that there was an early incestuous link, emotional if not physical, between Lucia and Giorgio and, in a broader sense, between Lucia and her father. She quotes one of Lucia's friends, Hélène Vanel, writing in the 1980s that Lucia "lived through many strange adventures, which she would tell us about, and I believe that they were often with her brother." (p. 149-50) Joyce himself knew that she "loved her brother in an extraordinary way. When he fell in love ... and finally married ... she went through many hardships."[2] (p. 171) On the other hand, Cary Baynes, the psychiatric assistant whom Carl Jung appointed to be Lucia's companion during his – unsuccessful – treatment of her in the early 1930s, was convinced that Lucia's father was the cause of all her emotional troubles: Baynes wrote, in jumbled syntax: "Lucia had the negative thought brought into the very midst of her life, not once-removed in books, but in her own father, that fact coupled with the whole incest situation and her lack of any orientation about living anyway ... was more than she could deal with." (p. 291) What is meant exactly by "the whole incest situation" is not made clear, as is so often the case in matters Jungian.

Although Kay Boyle, who befriended Lucia in Paris in the 1920s, later wrote that "Giorgio and Lucia were bitter about their father, and agreed on the question of the crippling effect his fame had on their lives," (p. 6) all the evidence suggests that Lucia was deeply infatuated with her father, or at least with the image of him which she spent so many years and so much emotional energy building in her head. While she was undergoing therapy with Jung, she wrote to Joyce: "If ever I take a fancy to anybody I swear to you on the head of Jesus that it will not be because I am not fond of you. Do not forget that." He was everywhere in her life, even after his death. In 1945, immured in a French asylum, she assured a visitor that although he was under the ground he was not gone: "*Cet imbécile, qu'est ce quil fait sous la terre? Quand est ce qu'il se décide à sortir? Il vous regarde tout le temps*."[3] (p. 410)

What are we to make of these humid familial inter-obsessions? Shloss makes much of them, but for all her passionate advocacy of the case for Lucia's lucidity, which is wholly to her credit, she is not as convincing as she thinks she is. The institution of the family, supposedly the framework upon which civilisation rests, is

in fact one of the strangest of the ad hoc bastions that humankind has erected against the incoherent reality into which it finds itself thrown.[4] Were the Joyces any more dysfunctional than any other set of intimate strangers forced to spend their lives together under the one roof?

The "whole incest situation", between brother and sister and daughter and father, is a theme that recurs throughout *Finnegans Wake*, and even Leopold Bloom's fond reveries on *les jeaunes filles en fleur* including his teenage daughter Milly would be enough to set the snouts of our latter-day thought police twitching. Shloss's close reading of the *Wake* in search of what she considers Lucia's pervasive presence in it – the chapter devoted to this work of decryption is entitled "A Father's Scrutiny" – is ingenious, and in itself a not insignificant contribution to Wakean studies.[5] She has no doubt that "Lucia's influence upon the life of her father and upon both the form and substance of *Finnegans Wake* was profound." (p. 424) Many of those who knew Joyce in the 1930s, which Lucia largely spent confined to asylums for the insane, support her conviction. Louis Gillet spoke of the "Passion of the Father" and said of Joyce that he "did not write this passion; he lived it." (p. 424) Joyce himself recognised the connection between Lucia and the nightbook that he was writing. Shloss quotes a moving testimony by Jacques Mercanton, who knew Joyce in Lausanne in 1938:

> In that night wherein his spirit struggled, that "bewildering of the nicht," lay hidden the poignant reality of a face dearly loved. He gave me details about the mental disorder from which his daughter suffered, recounted a painful episode without pathos, in that sober and reserved manner he maintained even in moments of the most intimate sorrow. After a long silence, in a deep, low voice, beyond hope, his hand on a page of his manuscript: "Sometimes I tell myself that when I leave this dark night, she too will be cured." (p. 425)

One asks again Shloss's central question: what happened to Lucia Joyce, that she was driven into that "dark night"? How important to her was her desire to be a dancer, and how destructive of her emotional equilibrium was her failure to achieve her ambition? Shloss devotes much space and energy to her account of Lucia's aspirations and training as a dancer. The 1920s, like the 1960s, were a time of restless questing after self-fulfilment and what had not yet come to be called "alternative lifestyles," which of course brought all manner of frauds and mountebanks scrambling out of the woodwork. Everywhere, it seemed, hordes of buxom young women in scanty tunics were leaping eagerly to the commands of this or that half-demented instructor. One of Lucia's teachers, the most colourful if not the most inspiring of them, was Raymond Duncan, brother of the more famous Isadora, "a man of extraordinary, even ludicrous eccentricity," Shloss remarks, (p. 99) who went about in toga and sandals and "looked like an unbearded Ulysses" – how, Shloss asks, could the daughter of James Joyce have failed to recognise the appropriateness of her choice of teacher?

It is not hard to imagine the effect of all this exuberance and ferment on the precariously balanced mind of the young Lucia Joyce. She had the luck initially to fall in with a group of dancers who along with Lucia formed themselves into "Les Six de rythme et couleur." They danced to the music of everyone from Scarlatti to Stravinsky, in a programme combining modern dance, mime and parody – as a girl Lucia had been a brilliant impersonator of Charlie Chaplin – and received some favourable notices, including one from André Levinson, the leading Parisian dance critic. The group was important to Lucia not only artistically but in that, as Shloss writes, "[I]t gave her a life apart from her family." (p. 137) On stage, she was transformed; Hélène Vanel, a member of the troupe, felt that for Lucia the dance "gave her a taste of life and a beautiful way to express her dreams with all her being, both body and soul." Joyce too admired his daughter's dancing, and even seems to have picked up some steps from her that he adapted to the capers he would often cut when in his cups. But there was a deeper resonance as well. "Watching the silent eloquence of his daughter's moving body, he begins to describe the meaning of his own language experiment in *Work in Progress* [that is, *Finnegans Wake*] in analogous terms." (p. 152)

Lucia could not dance out of the troubles that increasingly beset her. In some respects a typical 1920s "flapper", she was sexually precocious, disastrously so. As Shloss remarks, by 1930, when she was still in her early twenties, she had been abandoned by three lovers in rapid succession: Samuel Beckett, famously, but also Alexander Calder and the minor American artist and playboy Waldo Peirce. The following year she took up with a friend of her brother's, Alec Ponisovsky, a young Russian who was in love with Peggy Guggenheim's sister Hazel but who nevertheless was persuaded by Joyce's friends the Léons to propose to Lucia, though on what grounds is unclear. It is possible the wedding might have gone ahead, but as Lucia remarked with awful simplicity many years later, "I had a breakdown and had to give up the idea." (p. 219) It was the first of a succession of emotional collapses, varying between bouts of catatonia and outbursts of uncontrollable rage that led her on one occasion to set fire to her bedroom and on another to throw a chair at her mother.

Shloss's main villains are Giorgio, who on the evidence seems from early on to have been eager to have his sister shut away for good in an institution, and Nora, who according to Joyce himself was jealous of her daughter. Nora's antipathy was energetically returned by Lucia. When in 1931 Joyce and Nora decided that they should regularise their union and be married, Lucia, and her brother, were profoundly shocked at the discovery that they were illegitimate. On the eve of the family's temporary move to London, where the ceremony was to take place, Lucia flew into one of her tantrums, to which Nora responded by calling her a bastard. "If I am a bastard," Lucia shouted back, "who made me one?" (p. 208)

If Shloss points an unwavering finger of accusation for Lucia's subsequent life of incarceration at Giorgio – he "turned her over to the psychiatrists" (p. 227) – and at Nora, she exonerates Joyce entirely. This is somewhat puzzling. Although certainly he

loved his daughter and was tormented by her illness, whatever it may have been[6] – Joyce said it was "one of the most elusive diseases known to men and unknown to medicine" – there is no getting away from the fact that he acquiesced tacitly in her removal from the household in which her clamorous presence was a disruption of the peace and quiet that everyone, including himself, insisted was vital for his work. Is it naïve to wonder why he could not simply have told those who were eager for her to be put away that Lucia was a genius, as he had always insisted, that her apparent madness was no more and no less than the sign of misdirected creativity, and that she must not be abandoned to an institution? For abandoned she was. After the fall of France in 1940 she was in a clinic at La Baule on the Brittany coast, and Joyce made increasingly frantic efforts to have her transferred to a hospital in Switzerland, where he and Nora were living. He was still trying to rescue her when he died unexpectedly, of a perforated ulcer, in January 1941. Her greatest defender gone, Lucia was on her own. Nora and Giorgio left her to the mercies of the clinic's director, the kindly Dr Delmas, one of the few heroes of this sad tale. Delmas, his fees unpaid, kept Lucia under his wing through and after the war. For ten years her mother and brother ignored her. In 1949 Giorgio visited her for an hour, and decided his mother should not see her at all. Maria Jolas agreed: "It is so many years since [Nora] saw her that it hardly seems necessary now." (p. 410) Eventually Lucia was given into the care of Joyce's patron, Harriet Weaver, who moved her to a hospital at Northampton, where she remained until her death in 1982.

Lucia Joyce's story, which Shloss tells so movingly, not only wrings the heart but stirs one's anger. Whether it was intentional or not, Lucia does seem to have been, as one of Shloss's section headings has it, "a sacrifice for a book." (p. 416) This was a great and unforgivable injustice. Lucia had no illusions as to what had happened to her and why. Taking for herself the name of Stephen Dedalus's sad little sister, whom in *Ulysses* Stephen comes upon in her rags wistfully buying a French primer from a Dublin bookstall, she told her friend Dominique Maroger: "Dilly didn't have a chance. Me neither. I never had a chance! I was cumbersome, in the way."

Notes

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1 Paul Léon deserves a monument all of his own. When in late 1939 the Joyces left Paris, Léon, a Russian Jew, and his wife Lucie, went with them to Saint-Gérand-le-Puy in the south. In September 1940, however, the Léons returned to German-occupied Paris and set about rescuing and preserving the papers Joyce had left behind. The owner of the Joyces' apartment in Passy had decided to auction off their belongings, but Léon got there first and, having bribed the concierge, piled all the papers that would fit into a pushcart and trundled them away. When the auction took place, he borrowed money from one of Lucia's former lovers and managed to purchase more documents,

which he and his wife diligently catalogued and preserved. Later, when Léon sided with Giorgio Joyce's wife in a dispute with her husband, the family severed all connection with him. Shortly afterwards Léon was interned at Drancy, and died at the hands of the Nazis sometime in April 1942.

2 Witnessing the eagerness with which Shloss pounces upon these wisps of rumour one cannot but have a certain sympathy with Stephen Joyce in his determination to thwart the would-be grubbers in his family's linen basket. Having failed to prevent Richard Ellmann from publishing the young Joyce's sexually explicit letters to Nora, he obviously vowed to prevent anything similar happening in the case of his aunt and his father. "Where do you draw the line?" he demanded of an interviewer in the *New York Times* in 1988 [Shloss, p. 29]; obviously for him it was not a rhetorical question, since he had already decided that the line would be drawn as tightly as it could be around the documentation of his family's history insofar as it was within his control. To Shloss's insistence that no book, even *Finnegans Wake*, is worth the sacrifice of a girl's life, Stephen Joyce might counter that no book, not even *Lucia Joyce: To Dance in the Wake*, is worth the sacrifice of his father's good name.

3 "That imbecile. What is he doing under the earth? When will he decide to leave? He's watching you all the time." In Lucia's frantic understanding her father had become an amalgam of Blake's Nobodaddy and Joyce's own "erse solid man" Finnegan, the giant sleeping under the Hill of Howth.

4 Few critics have remarked on the frightening ordinariness of the Samsa family in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

5 Although there are occasions when one catches a faint but definite echo of Nobokov's poor Kinbote maniacally reading references to himself into every other line of John Shade's poem *Pale Fire*. And indeed, when one hears of such things as Joyce's "blindness to the nature of the very real young and modern female existence unfolding before him," (p. 77) there flashes before the mind's eye an image of the thoroughly modern headmistress of Dolores Haze's Beardsley school lecturing poor Humbert on his girleen's growing needs.

6 Shloss dismisses the old rumour that Lucia suffered from hereditary syphilis contracted from her father. In the mid-1930s Lucia was diagnosed as having too many white blood cells, indicating a lingering infection, though it could not be found. At about the same time, when Joyce visited her in a Swiss mental institution, Lucia confided to him that she thought she had syphilis; Shloss tells us this was dismissed by the Jungian Cary Baynes as an attempt to seduce her father "by a young woman whose illness was caused by her illicit desire for a man who refused to understand its importance." (p. 288)