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**JOYCE'S FICTION  
AND  
THE NEW RISE  
OF  
THE NOVEL**

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Franca Ruggieri*

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‘YES, YES: A WOMAN TOO. LIFE, LIFE’: LUCIA  
AND THE LIFE-WRITING ASPECTS OF JOYCE’S  
NOVELS

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**Introduction**

Recent critically acclaimed graphic narratives have ostensibly been inspired by the fiction and life of James Joyce. Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and Mary M. Talbot’s *Dotter of Her Father’s Eyes* are graphic memoirs that explicitly engage with Joyce’s work and some aspects of his personal life. Both tell stories of daughters who reflect on their relationship with, and the often harmful proclivities of, their fathers. Bechdel’s father Bruce was a closeted homosexual who, Alison came to suspect, killed himself shortly after her revelation to her parents of her homosexuality and Bruce’s own admission to her of his. Talbot’s work tells the story of her struggles growing up in the shadow of her father, Joyce scholar James S. Atherton, who was often aloof, had a foul temper, and was constantly occupied with his academic work on Joyce. Talbot also draws parallels between her experiences and those of Lucia Joyce. These self-writing texts are worth consideration not only because they depict lives lived and understood in reference to Joyce and his works, but also because they raise questions about the nature and characteristics of the great Irish writer’s fiction.

Scholars and biographers of Joyce have remarked that his works are autobiographical—yet, this often seems to be taken as a foregone conclusion that no longer requires any proof. Nevertheless, Joyce’s penchant for fictionalizing actual events, personalities, family members, friends and acquaintances, and even intimate personal experiences has been pointed out in studies, such as those of Richard Ellmann,

Brenda Maddox, and John McCourt, that investigate his fiction alongside letters and other accounts of his life and times. Yet, while many commentators take such a view of Joyce's fiction for granted, it is not always evident whether and to what extent Joyce's works are autobiographical. Would his works satisfy the requirements of a definition of autobiography? And supposing for a moment that Joyce's works were indeed autobiographical, what features and decisions with regard to his texts would allow us to consider them as such?

I would like to show here that considering graphic novels that relate to Joyce's life and work enable us to highlight and investigate some of the life-writing characteristics of Joyce's works. Comparing the graphic narratives with Joyce's fiction can underline the features of the latter. For instance, these graphic memoirs tell the stories not only of one self, but of self and others (in fact, many others). *Fun Home* is Bechdel's coming of age narrative, which interconnects with her father's more tragic story. *Dotter* is simultaneously Talbot's memoirs—recollections of a childhood dominated by the fear of a distant and constantly irritable father—and a condensed biography of Lucia Joyce that depicts her promise, anguish and ultimate fate. Now if these graphic narratives have a relational character, might one be justified in describing Joyce's work, supposing it is autobiographical to some degree, as utterly self-concerned, as Terry Eagleton suggests in his review of Carol Loeb Schloss' book *Lucia Joyce* (2004: 17)? I contend here that this question can be approached by first discussing if it might be justifiable to speak of Joyce's fiction as autobiographical. I wish to demonstrate here that Joyce does identify with his main male protagonists. Second, the self-concern of the author which is displayed in his fiction is paired with the near-invisibility of the daughter in the narrative world, which in turn mirrors the marginalization Lucia suffered in real life. However, I will also point out towards the end of this paper that there is a movement from utter self-concern to a more other-regarding tendency in Joyce's later work, a dynamic that is attested to by the proliferation of probable references to Lucia. Joyce's fiction moves from an almost exclusive self-regard to a relationality comparable to that of the above-mentioned graphic memoirs.

## Autobiographical Joyce

Philippe Lejeune's now classic and widely contested definition of autobiography claims it is a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (1989: 4). The writing self thus needs to be the same as the written self. As Lejeune adds, "the author, the narrator, and the protagonist must be identical" (5). He also speaks of a pact that is implicitly entered into by the author and reader: that the former tells the truth and that this truth concerns the author herself or himself. While certain qualifications need to be made given that they are rendered in a graphic medium, Lejeune's basic definition applies to the graphic memoirs of Bechdel and Talbot. Their works do not only consist of texts that establish identity between author, subject, and narrator—they also contain self-portraits that make this identification more visible and concrete. How about Joyce's writings? Considered in the light of this definition, Joyce's works cannot be said to be autobiographical in any simple or straightforward sense. Lejeune's understanding of autobiography applies, for instance, to the *Confessions* of St. Augustine. We know that the author of this work is the same as its narrator and subject. It is Augustine who, lying and crying under a fig tree, experienced hearing a child's voice saying, "take it and read" (1961: 177), and it is the same person who narrates this turning point in the book. In Joyce's case, however, we would hesitate to attribute the fictional work *Ulysses* to the fictional characters Leopold Bloom or Stephen Dedalus, for instance.

Yet particular works by Joyce have actually been described as life-writing texts. John McCourt comments, for example, that Joyce's unpublished long poem *Giacomo Joyce*, which is an account of Joyce's infatuation with one of his wealthy English-language students in Trieste, is "more autobiographical than his other fiction" (2000: 204). Note that this is a comparative statement that suggests that the other works of Joyce bear autobiographical features as well. After all, McCourt's work is devoted to tracing the roots of Joyce's fiction to the many years he spent in the beautiful coastal city of Trieste. Brenda

Maddox, on the other hand, makes a more general statement by saying that Joyce's writings are autobiographical—yet, she adds, “none more so than *Exiles*” (1988: 129). This is not at all surprising as Nora is the focus of Maddox's work and it has been established by biographers that Joyce and Nora knowingly played out their parts in the Triestine drama that involved Roberto Prezioso. It was a bizarre situation that humiliated the latter, allowed James and Nora to affirm their commitment to each other, and which eventually became the basis of the plot and characters of Joyce's sole play, as well as some plot elements in *Ulysses*.

I would like to note further that commentators have not only determined parallels between characters and plots in the creative work on the one hand, and the Joyces and the vicissitudes of their life on the other. There are indications that while Joyce's fiction does not perfectly fit Lejeune's definition, other texts point to elements that might justify calling his novels autobiographical. We know for instance, that *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and its earlier incarnations are stylized fictionalizations of the life, experiences, and aspirations of the young Joyce, who decided to call himself “Stephen Dedalus” in the work of fiction, thus combining Christian and pagan figures in that name (Ellmann 1982: 148). Add to this the fact that Joyce also signed correspondence as “Stephen Dedalus”, for instance on a 1912 postcard sent from a holiday in Galway to Ettore Schmitz (see photo inserts in McCourt 2000). In addition to this, prior to their self-chosen exile away from Ireland, in a letter to Nora Barnacle Joyce speaks of his story “The Sisters”, an early version of which had then recently come out in *The Irish Homestead*, as written “by me (Stephen Dedalus)” (Maddox 1988: 36). These two instances show that however Joyce's estimation of Stephen eventually developed, he did identify with this male protagonist.

Joyce's fiction could therefore be called autobiographical insofar as he consciously incorporated details of his own life into his creations, transformed real life persons into his characters, and established in writings apart from the fictional texts that there is some degree of identification between the author, narrator, and protagonist(s) in his

work. Although it cannot simply be said that Joyce's novels are autobiographies in the sense we consider a work like Augustine's *Confessions* to be, they do share some aspects of this self-regarding genre as they relate the development of the written self that could be identified with the writing self. If Joyce's fiction is self-concerned, in the sense of the artist's preoccupation with his art, as well as the degree of attention given to male characters that the author and narrator could identify with, might this not be considered consistent with the picture of the writing self we gather from the biographies: one who constantly and skilfully promoted his own self-interest—in many cases to the detriment of loved ones and friends?

The largely self-regarding autobiographical qualities of Joyce's novels can be made more obvious when contrasted with graphic memoirs that engage with his life and work. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel draws parallels between her relationship with her father and the encounter of Bloom and Stephen. Talbot goes further in *Dotter of Her Father's Eyes* by interweaving her own coming-of-age narrative with that of Lucia Joyce. The tragi-comic memoirs of Bechdel and Talbot express their writing selves *and* create space for the unfolding of the narratives of others.

### **Graphic Narratives and Joyce**

The life and work of Joyce figure prominently in both Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Talbot's *Dotter*. The former relates Alison's development from being the daughter of intellectual parents in a provincial town in Pennsylvania to a young adult who comes to an awareness of her homosexuality, all of this described with the help of drawings and literary references. There is no question about the autobiographical character of her narrative—Bechdel even uses documentary evidence, such as family photographs and letters, reproducing them by hand in the pages of her book. But it is not only her own story that she narrates in the graphic medium: employing allusions to *Portrait* and *Ulysses*, which respectively frame the first and last chapters of the memoir, she tells the story of Bruce, a lifelong closeted homosexual who simultaneously hid and expressed his true self through his preoccupation with

the restoration of their Gothic home, interior design, and literature. Bechdel surmises that he was wracked by guilt and shame for not having the courage to come out, and that this was part of the reason why he committed suicide by jumping into the path of an oncoming truck.

More importantly, Bechdel engages with Joyce for reasons she explicitly states in her memoir. First, she tells us that the literary references are not only “descriptive devices”, but also a way for her to make sense of her parents (who were highly reserved and uncommunicative) as they are according to her “most real to me in fictional terms” (Bechdel 2006: 67). *Fun Home* is steeped in literary allusions, from references to Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* to Henry James’ *A Portrait of a Lady* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Key life moments are narrated in reference to characters and episodes from these books. Second, one also learns that it is her way of negotiating her relationship with her deceased father, whose favorite author was Joyce. Bechdel admits that when she had to take a seminar on *Ulysses* in college, a time when she wanted to remain free from the influence of her parents, she asked for her father’s advice about the course, and yet spent most of her time reading feminist and lesbian literature. The difficulty of Alison’s attempt to connect with her father is depicted in what she calls their “Ithaca moment”: an entire page with a series of panels that show them in a car, on their way to the cinema, sitting side by side and avoiding each other’s gaze. They awkwardly talk about their sexual experiences. Bechdel would reveal later on that she would not have such a conversation with her father again.

*Dotter of Her Father’s Eyes* is also a graphic narrative about daughters and fathers. It is Talbot’s own memoir, chronicling the experiences of a girl who grows up with an imperious father and Joyce scholar. The latter is often depicted as sitting in his study in front of a typewriter, smoking and working, or venting his anger on the raucous children of the house. From the point of view of a little girl, he was entirely consumed by work and showed little concern for anything or anyone else. “He was always muttering Joycean phrases to himself. It sounded like nonsense. But he seemed to enjoy it”, Talbot recalls (2002: 20). The suggested similarities between Atherton and Joyce are

obvious: both were intellectual men, committed to their artistic and scholarly pursuits, mostly aloof, and experienced by their daughters as a “cold, mad, feary, father” (*FW* 628.02). Given the comparable experiences with the kind of fathers they had, Talbot likewise draws parallels between her and Lucia’s lives—with the crucial difference that Lucia ended up in a *maison de santé*, alone and far from Joyce who had to flee France on the outbreak of the Second World War, while Talbot struck out on her own, finding love and eventually success as a university professor.

In addition to the references they make to Joyce in view of their fathers’ preoccupation with his work, these two graphic narratives are also generically related to Joyce’s fiction—that is, if we take the latter as bearing autobiographical features. They relate the life and trace the development of a written self who is identifiable with the text’s narrator and author. Yet the graphic memoirs differ from Joyce’s fiction in a crucial way: they tell stories of the person is perhaps more often than not marginalized in Joyce. Looking at Joyce’s novels through the lenses of autobiography highlights their self-regarding character.

“Yes, yes: a woman too. Life, life”. If Joyce the man was intensely disinterested in anything but his own concerns, this trait can, to a certain degree, be found in his fiction too, which tends to follow the thoughts, desires, and misadventures of its male protagonists. Could it be said that Joyce’s fiction reflects details of Joyce’s personal life? If this is so, then it would seem that when we read about Bloom, Stephen, and HCE, we read about Joyce speaking about himself. Might Eagleton be right in describing Joyce’s work as concerned with nothing but itself—just as Joyce the author was intensely concerned with nothing but himself and his art? Such a reading of his texts would seem to be consistent with what we know about him. Maddox quips, commenting on the fact that his younger brother Stanislaus had to learn to protect himself from the demands of Joyce, that the latter was “outrageously indifferent to interests other than his own” (Maddox 1988: 40). Indeed, Joyce had a penchant for putting his own concerns ahead those of others, constantly and adroitly promoting himself and his work, as well soliciting moral and financial support from friends

and benefactors. Just as Joyce focused on himself and his interests, his fiction centered on male protagonists and their quests, which in *Ulysses* is one of realizing paternity. The outcome of Joyce's self-centering in his life and fiction is the marginalization of others close to him, in particular of the daughters that he produced.

For instance, we read in *Ulysses* that Leopold's only daughter, Milly, is referred to first as "a sweet young thing" or the "photo girl" found by Bannon in Mullingar and who Stephen hears about (*U* 1.685-86). Later, she appears again through a letter addressed to her "Dearest Papli" (*U* 4.397). The reader learns from the missive that it was Milly's birthday recently; she received presents from her parents; she is elsewhere working as a photographer's assistant; she knows and spends time with a student named Bannon; and she also knows Blazes Boylan. At this point, we do not know much else apart from these few details. Later on, Milly will drift in and out of Bloom's thoughts and memories, but she does not enjoy the same presence or visibility as Stephen, Leopold, or any of the many other minor characters in this lengthy work. Unlike Gerty McDowell or the other girls in the "Nausicaa" episode, we do not see Milly depicted in any concrete way, nor do we hear her speak in her own voice, except through the thoughts and remembrances of others. For instance, Bloom recalls his daughter in "Hades": "Molly. Milly. Same thing watered down. Her tomboy oaths. O jumping Jupiter! Ye gods and little fishes! Still, she's a dear girl. Soon be a woman. Mullingar. Dearest Papli. Young student. Yes, yes: a woman too. Life, life" (*U* 6.87-90).

These lines refer back to the original letter through which Milly is introduced to the reader and is allowed to "speak" in the "Calypso" episode. We learn more about her through Bloom: it is clear that he thinks that she is much like her mother, a younger if diluted version if you will. Molly appears first as a voluptuous body in the fifth episode, then returns in flashes as a hand out of a carriage window, a mistress and unfaithful wife in Bloom's fantasies in "Circe", then as a presence in a room in the deep of the night in Ithaca. She returns at last as a remarkable voice in "Penelope", possessed of a full personality that causes the reader to see the narratives and desires of Stephen and

Bloom in a different light. Alas, we do not even hear Milly's own voice. As Katherine Ryan convincingly points out in her reflection on Bloom's anxiety about paternity and inheritance, Milly is a "blind spot" in both the mind of Bloom and the critical discussions of the relations at the core of *Ulysses* (2014: 18). She stays in the margins and even when Bloom's wanderings and death-wary consciousness drifts towards her, she does not become present forcefully enough to disrupt the patterns of Bloom's aspirations and desires.

As autobiographical texts, it would be no surprise to see in Joyce's *Portrait* and *Ulysses* that much attention is given to the main male protagonists with whom at one time or another Joyce as author identified. However, this comes at a price: the daughter (and other related themes, such as mother-daughter relationships) could at most only be marginally present. We have seen this to be the case in *Ulysses*, where Milly, Bloom's beloved daughter and the fictional version of Joyce's real one, appears for the most part as a thought or memory. This sort of situation contrasts sharply with what one finds in the graphic memoirs that allude to Joyce which I have considered above. As we have seen, they not only tell the story of daughters, but also establish cross-discursive links with texts that concern Joyce's life and works. However, if as Schloss points out, Lucia is inscribed in Joyce's fiction in the figures of daughter and wife (2003: 8), can the same things be said of *Finnegans Wake*?

### **Daughters in the *Wake***

In her highly controversial biography, Schloss makes an argument for a different reading of Lucia's life, endeavors and ultimate fate. She argues that no conclusive diagnosis of Lucia was made by any of the doctors that saw and treated her. Concomitant to this claim is the assertion that the opinions of non-experts and amateur psychiatrists prevailed and influenced the decisions made by the Joyces. Schloss also suggests controversially that an unwanted, and ultimately aborted, pregnancy was the real reason behind Lucia's abandoning her dancing career. Perhaps more importantly, however, Schloss takes pains to demonstrate that Lucia was an artist in her own right: she was a writer

of poems and a novel, a talented and promising dancer who trained with the best instructors of her day, and even her later efforts at illustration had some merit. Sadly, her ambitions were derailed by the strict views of her parents and were sacrificed in favor of the genius of her father. Another positive aspect of the narrative that Schloss constructs is the claim that Lucia collaborated in the creation of what was then known as *Work in Progress*: she knew that her father was a keen observer, so the words in her letters and some of her dramatic actions were intended to catch his attention and provide him with material for his next literary masterpiece.

Notwithstanding the shortcomings and dangers that scholars like McCourt (2003-2004) and Finn Fordham (2009: 18) have already pointed out, Schloss' remarks on Lucia and *Finnegans Wake* become relevant here. She observes first of all that daughters in Joyce's fictional and actual worlds were pushed to the side in favor of male protagonists and the genius of the author. Furthermore, while some of her assertions and methods are questionable, Schloss is able to trace some of the likely coded references to Lucia in *Finnegans Wake*. Lucia is inscribed into the book as a little girl cloud, "a Nuvoletta, a lass" (*FW* 159.05-9), one of the delightful rainbow dancers who "leap so loopyly, loopyly, as they link to light" (*FW* 226.26-28), the lovelorn and "gloomy Isa" (*FW* 226.4), and as the schizophrenic sister Issy, etc. In addition to entertaining ambitions of becoming an artist and training to become a performer, Lucia was aware early on that her father watched her closely. As she learned, performed, gave up her career, and sank into a worrying state, the fact she was the "dotter of his eyes" (*FW* 372.03) took on various meanings. She was the apple of her father's eyes, an object of growing concern, one who also enabled her father to see, and a fellow artist who wished to collaborate in the creation of Joyce's next literary offspring. Lastly, taking into account the inscriptions of Lucia into Wakean language, along with the other transmutations of members of the Joyce family and circle of friends, Schloss goes on to suggest that Joyce's last great work is an epic that encodes the actual history and vicissitudes of a particular family (2003: 436).

Part of Lucia's tragedy was that she too was a victim of Joyce's—as Maddox puts it—“malignant self-absorption” (1988: 292). We have seen above that the fictional character Milly in *Ulysses* in some ways shared her fate: she was deprived of the chance to become fully visible, to come into her own. Yet, when we read of probable equivalents or transmutations of Lucia in the *Wake*, we find a different picture. This last work of Joyce does not limit itself to its male protagonists: mothers and daughters are definitely present, more conspicuous, and enjoy more significant roles in the narrative world. Schloss is not alone in pointing out that Lucia is encoded in *Finnegans Wake* in multiple ways. Finn Fordham demonstrates, by correlating drafts, proofs, and letters that mention Lucia and her worsening mental state, that veiled references to Lucia can be identified in the *Wake*, and that they also displayed Joyce's changing attitudes toward his daughter and her condition. Joyce makes certain changes to his *Work in Progress* that reflect his evolving understanding of Lucia: her identification with lightning, along with its connotations of clarity and clairvoyance, eventually gives way to her figuring as Electra, with the signification of identification with the father and the mad urge to inflict violence upon the faulted mother (Fordham 2002: 352). At this point, we can appreciate that the contrast with *Ulysses* and its depiction of Bloom's daughter Milly is striking. If Milly is modeled on Lucia, then we can see that both were marginalized. *Finnegans Wake*, as a work with (auto)biographical dimensions, is capacious, protean, and multivalent enough to contain varied references to daughter figures and their real-life correlate, Lucia. It seems then that whereas *Ulysses* bears a tendency quite opposed to that which we find in the graphic memoirs we considered above, *Finnegans Wake* shares their relational dynamic.

## Conclusion

In this paper I considered the question of whether Joyce's works are autobiographical. In addition to noting that Joyce's creative process involved both the transmutation of personal experiences into a profoundly stylized kind of realist fiction, I also pointed out that Joyce

partly identified with his main male protagonists. Stephen Dedalus is a clear case in point. Given this fact, Joyce's works in a certain sense meet the requirements of a widely discussed understanding of autobiography. Then, I brought to the fore a characteristic of life-writing that takes on a high degree of intensity in Joyce. Like other life-writing texts, *Ulysses* is characterized by a persistent focus on the self. This is a feature that it shares with two graphic memoirs that make explicit references to the life, times, and writings of Joyce. *Fun Home* and *Dotter* are graphic narratives that depict writing selves that wish to come to terms with their past and their relationships. However, these works are also relational at their core in that they not only tell the personal stories of their creators, but of other individuals too: of past and lost loved ones, as well as those of strangers and even of fictional characters. *Dotter* even contains a biography of Lucia Joyce. These graphic memoirs share with *Ulysses* an obvious self-concern; yet *Ulysses* differs from them as it puts premium on its own male protagonists, thus reflecting Joyce's narrow self-interestedness. One outcome of this is the marginalization of the daughter figure—a dynamic that mirrors the manner Lucia Joyce was seen and treated, as well as her ultimate fate.

Interestingly enough, what was largely absent or undeveloped in *Ulysses* gains more visibility in *Finnegans Wake*. Consistent with the plurality of meanings engendered by its words, there is a multiplicity and a certain protean aspect to the daughter figures it evokes. Commentators have demonstrated that these refer to and/or are modeled on Lucia. Schloss reads the whole story as the history of a particular family told in a coded fashion. Others find parallels and even causal connections between real-life events that involved Lucia and her deteriorating psychological condition, and particular female figures in *Finnegans Wake*. It would seem then that this later work of Joyce, in addition to its being an extraordinary kind of life-writing text, shares a crucial feature of the graphic memoirs that we have considered here. Like *Fun Home* and *Dotter*, the *Wake* provides space not only for one figure's narrative; Joyce wrote it in such a way that the other, and in

particular the daughter, becomes both visible and able to speak in her own, albeit transmuted, voice.

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