

JULIA DARLING

Childhood, recollection and the notebooks

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Julia Darling's private notebooks are multilayered, complex and contradictory, revealing ways in which individual subjectivity may be explored and constructed through narrative voice. This essay will discuss how, by occupying her own private textual space, Darling dramatised a self in her notebooks, thereby creating an unconventional and creative fictionalised life-narrative. Although Darling's interpretations of the self are fragmented throughout different notebooks, there is a sense that she sought autobiographical continuity in the form of a coming-of-age persona. This continuity is framed within the temporal immediacy of her journals, which although shaped by events, were not primarily diaries whose purpose was to keep records. As material and visual ways of self-inquiry, the journals demonstrate how Darling integrated everyday observations and daily note-taking with inner monologue, life writing, and in particular, storytelling.

With special consideration given to the themes of memory and childhood, the focus of this essay will be on five notebooks dated between 1992 and 2002. They are of different shapes and sizes, spiral and perfect bound, with both lined and plain pages. Some journals are unfinished while others are completed; Darling would occasionally turn a book upside down and work from the reverse, so sections of text moving in opposite directions collide midway on the space of a page. The journals therefore appear as unconstrained ways of creatively developing ideas and refining

technique, rather than having been written with publication in mind. Darling did not record her life by means of a formal autobiography or memoir before her premature death; however during the last three years of her life, she did write a regular blog, using an autobiographical voice.

In contrast to Darling's blog, which was formally structured like a diary and open to public view, were her often undated and seemingly chaotic personal notebooks. We can assume that within these private papers Darling provided her own audience, which situates the potential, and now active, reader encountering her archive – in a curiously participatory position. Professor Margo Culley discusses the relation between historical diary writers and their readers in *A Day at a Time*, her study of women's episodic writing. She suggests that the 'text created in a continuous presence but now fixed in time, must be re-created by a reader in a new, continuous present'.¹ As a result, the reader must consider the immediacy of the moment of writing alongside her own continuity through awareness of the passage of time. With regard to Darling's journals, the fixed nature of her writing about childhood may transport the reader to specific transformational moments in the life of the writer. However, there is also a timeless quality about many of her themes, including explorations of familial dynamics of power and the adolescent struggle towards a sense of identity.

Childhood is a theme consistently returned to throughout the journals, even when, due to Darling's battle with cancer, her personal writing became increasingly directed towards a narrative of health, body and treatment. She wrote in her essay

¹ Margo Culley, 'Introduction', in *A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1985), p.24.

‘Small Beauties’ how, as a mother of two young children, writing helped her feel less ‘invisible’.² The act of writing gave Darling a collaborative platform, first as a performance poet with the group she founded, The Poetry Virgins, and a playwright working with young people at Live Theatre in Newcastle upon Tyne. Motherhood may have engendered the feeling of invisibility; however for Darling, it also prompted the work of memory and reinvigorated detailed recollections of childhood: family life and her role as mother in the 1990s providing connection to the position of daughter in the 1960s. Observations in Darling’s notebooks suggest a striking contrast between her own rather patriarchal, intellectually conventional and culturally traditional upbringing in Winchester and the nonconformist world of her own children brought up in Newcastle upon Tyne by a group of artistic ‘othermothers’.³

Darling’s interior self-portraits of both a daughter and mother are not explicitly confessional, as they are without acknowledgement of a reader (other than the author). However, Professor Rita Felski’s delineation between two types of confessional text is a useful framework in which to place Darling’s life writing. The first is the episodic diary ‘depicting events as they occur rather than attempting to select and organize in terms of any unifying structure’. The second definition is retrospective and therefore more pertinent for a discussion of Darling’s journals. As Felski states, ‘with the benefit of hindsight, it becomes possible to focus on those moments which have been revealed as turning points in the development of a life

² Julia Darling, ‘Small Beauties’ in *The Fruits of Labour*, ed. by Penny Sumner (London: The Women’s Press, 2001), pp. 1-13, (p. 3).

³ Andrea O’Reilly ‘Introduction’ in *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich’s Of Woman Born*, ed. by Andrea O’Reilly (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p.11.

history'.⁴ The essay will consider such transformational moments in self-writing; intense moments of narrative within Darling's notebooks. However, Darling's methods of self-authorship contradict Felski's theory that there exists a tendency to 'deemphasize the aesthetic and fictive dimension of the text in order to give the appearance of authentic self expression'.⁵ Darling did the reverse: in her search for self-expression, she emphasised and developed the aesthetic and fictive dimensions of the text. I also depart from Felski's belief that the feminist confession seeks 'to reduce the patterning and organization of experience which characterizes historical narrative,' and that 'its structure is episodic and fragmented, not chronological and linear.'⁶ As Professors Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson observe in their assessment of autobiographical theory, the belief that women's autobiographies do not represent linear narrative, relationality or authority of experience, has 'been challenged as gender essentialism from within feminist theory'.⁷ Following this line of argument, I will argue that Darling's journals reveal a tension between the more coherent presentation of prose, poetry and playwriting, often appearing in draft form as linear and precise and her representation of lived experience – marked by the fragmentation and chaos of daily life.

Self-writing within Darling's private papers is open-ended and antithetical to autobiography as a structured literary form. I do not therefore contend that

⁴ Rita Felski 'On Confession,' in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), pp.83-95, (p.85-86).

⁵ *ibid.* p.87.

⁶ *ibid.* p.86.

⁷ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, 'Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women's Autobiographical Practices', in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, p.40.

recollections are to be read as honest, factual versions of events, nor are they somehow ‘accurate’ reflections of a fixed, coherent subject, with the potential for giving specific meaning to published work. Rather than seeking an *a priori* essence or ‘true’ presence, with the potential moral overtones this may entail, I understand Darling’s writings in Professor Sidonie Smith’s terms: autobiography as ‘a cultural and linguistic “fiction” constituted through historical ideologies of selfhood and the process of our storytelling’.⁸ Darling’s narratives, particularly of childhood, are rather like negotiations with the past – as versions of a life – quite literally in instances where a story or poem based on autobiographical elements is redrafted and revised in different forms. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson propose a view of the remembered past and present in flux and dialogue, within their analysis of visual and textual interfaces:

Situating in a specific time and place, the autobiographical subject is in dialogue with her own processes and archives of memory. The past is not a static repository of experience but always engaged from a present moment, itself ever-changing.⁹

This idea brings to mind philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva’s theory of the embodied ‘subject-in-process’ which, as Linda Anderson observes, is a ‘subject constructing herself through a writing which aims consistently and courageously towards the unknown’.¹⁰ For Darling, the self-referential practice of life writing was

⁸ Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.45.

⁹ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, ‘Introduction’, in *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*, ed. by Smith and Watson (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2002), p.9.

¹⁰ Linda Anderson, *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century: Remembered Futures*, (London: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf: 1997), p.49.

tenuous, unstable and dynamic, the subject attempting to remember herself in, perhaps, previously forgotten moments of time.

With consideration to theoretical views of the autobiographical subject, we can approach Darling's journals as fragmentary forms of self-authorship in which both memory and self were in process and ever-changing. It's worth noting this idea reflects the fragmentary nature of Darling's writing life, and we can see from her notebooks how creative work was interrupted by lists such as 'Julia's Jobs', drawings and doodles, newspaper clippings, budgets and interviews carried out for research purposes. When creativity was adjourned it was for practical considerations: by commissions, bills to pay and children's shoes to buy, so one can experience within her journals a variety of voices, including mother, author, poet, creative writing tutor, interviewer and essayist. Discontinuity is in evidence within the notebooks because they were always in process: Darling would jot notes in the same journal, travelling by bus into Newcastle's city centre, writing in her solitary rented room and at home, where she might say to friends over dinner, 'Let's write some lyrics for a song'.¹¹

She would also draft letters in her notebooks to friends, funders and collaborators, in addition to writing letters to the self, in particular to parts of her body such as her feet and hands. Furthermore, when considered in its complete form, a single journal may be interpreted as an extended letter to the self, within which there are individual letters. Discussing fragmentary forms of autobiography in her 1988 essay 'Epistolary Autobiography and the Postulation of the Self,' Professor Katherine

¹¹ Interview with Darling's life partner Bev Robinson, May 2019.

R. Goodman defined letters as ‘not continuously or objectively narrated text’.¹² The idea of fragmentation in autobiographical writing persists within literary theory and in the recently published *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History*, Christian Klein posits how ‘autobiography recounts the experiences of an incomplete story from the “I” perspective in a necessarily fragmented form’.¹³ Darling’s life narratives may be described in these terms as necessarily fragmented, due to the unreliability of memory, the partial perspective and the disruption of lived experience.

Darling’s private papers represent a process in which a writer is constituted and makes herself anew through emotional engagement with her own recollections. We must also be aware that although Darling’s published works rely on an intersubjective exchange with a reader or audience, the journals are intimate investigations into the thematics of writing the self, without such responsibility or dialogic process (in her lifetime). Darling was instead in dialogue with the processes of her own memory and she used her notebooks as sites of negotiation in a revision of her life. By recording, through text and images, her responses to experiential reality, past and present, the notebooks show how she self-dramatised an identity which aspired towards cohesiveness. In the following sections, I seek to explore how Darling’s autobiographical practice was creatively connected to her memories but uncontained by them, allowing the past to be, not so much reconstructed, as imaginatively reassembled in the present.

¹² Katherine R. Goodman, ‘Elisabeth to Meta: Epistolary Autobiography and the Postulation of the Self’, in *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography*, ed. by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (London: Cornell University Press, 1988), p.312.

¹³ Christian Klein, ‘Biography as a Concept of Thought: On the premises of biographical research and narrative’, in *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History*, ed. by Hans Renders, Binne de Haan and Jonne Harmsma (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 79.

‘The thick absence of everything’

For Darling, the medium of memory was narrative and we can trace how recollections of childhood – themselves deceptive – emerge as a compelling set of fictions within the ‘present’ of which they were written. It’s useful to consider the coalescence between autobiography and fiction with reference to Professor Shari Benstock’s discussion of selfhood in her essay ‘Authorizing the Autobiographical’. She wrote how ‘autobiography reveals gaps’ not just in time and space but also between the ‘manner and matter of its discourse’.¹⁴ Her argument suggests that as the meeting of writing and selfhood is always deferred, autobiography itself is an impossible dream and ‘what begins on the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction’.¹⁵ For Darling, the creation of fiction was, as I understand it, a reflective act, an exploration of her unconscious, or what she called her ‘inner landscape’.¹⁶ The autobiographer’s unconscious and its importance to the practice of women’s autobiographical writing, was discussed by Benstock in Professor James Olney’s terms, emphasising the metaphoric perspective. He writes of a ‘vertical thrust from consciousness down into the unconscious rather than to a horizontal thrust from the present into the past’.¹⁷ Placed in the context of Darling’s creative process, this observation is indicative of a palimpsest whereby a

¹⁴ Shari Benstock, ‘Authorizing the Autobiographical,’ *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings*, (London: University of North Carolina: 1988), p.11.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ ‘Small Beauties,’ p.7.

¹⁷ James Olney, ‘Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of *Bios*,’ in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) p.236, cited in *The Private Self*, p.10-11.

narration is submerged or overwritten by another, second or even third impression. In her journals, memories do appear to be overlain yet also complemented by the opacity of storytelling. As a result new shapes emerge, which may be described as neither vertical movements nor horizontal timelines, but more like vertices where curves, lines and edges meet.

Shaping the medium of memory into narrative is a concept given perspective by Sidonie Smith in her discussion of women's self-representation.

The autobiographer has to rely on a trace of something from the past, a memory; yet memory is ultimately a story about, and thus a discourse on, original experience, so that recovering the past is not a hypostasizing of fixed grounds and absolute origins but, rather, an interpretation of earlier experience that can never be divorced from the filterings or subsequent experience or articulated outside the structures of language and storytelling.¹⁸

Following Smith's line of interpretation we can conceive of Darling's autobiographical writing as a dual process, both the product of interpreting her own life and a way of bestowing meaning to experiences and memories. Returning to the idea of vertices, we can consider passages about childhood within the journals as occupying different textual spaces. They are reminiscent of a Cubist assemblage – rendering the self through disparate elements – splintered and divided throughout different notebooks. Darling studied Fine Art and it's useful to consider theorist Michel Beaujour's concept of the literary self-portrait as a metaphorical act of painting 'focused on the present of writing rather than the remembrance of the past and referring all things to the speaking subject and his perceptions'.¹⁹ It is clear that

¹⁸ Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*, p.45.

¹⁹ Michel Beaujour, *Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), p.340, cited in *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, p.280.

Darling did consciously consider writing about the processes of self and used different literary techniques to do so. Her narrations range from memories of very young childhood and the ‘Sunday School picture of Jesus with frayed edges’ to poetry about primary school where she was ‘the top rope climber/in the Saturday morning gym class’. Other descriptions include the rituals of grooming horses at the tack room, while more irreverent writing focuses on the subversion of young adulthood and rebellion against authoritarianism. Darling’s anti-nostalgic ‘life stories’ may refrain from moving fluidly through the timespan of an archive due to the discontinuity of memory, however the reader may impose an order, thereby becoming aware of a sense of coherence to self-writing within the journals.

A recollection from childhood which Darling returned to over the course of her adult life, was that of grooming horses at the local stables, a place which she described as ‘found’ at the age of seven and ‘lost’ six years later. In a notebook dated 1998, she recalled the road journey there: ‘It wound through a thick short wood, then down into the light where the horses were. It was always dark on that road.’²⁰ In a passage from a notebook written six years previously, entitled ‘Tack Room’ Darling emphasised the hardship involved in being a stable girl in a lightless, cold environment, sweeping the yard, raking the stables or ‘staggering in freezing mists to take horses to fields’.²¹ Writing as the onlooker – the stranger experiencing events – Darling was aware that she was vulnerable and exploited, that this was ‘free child labour.’ However a process of selving takes place in the passage, and from the child’s perspective, she experienced the stables as ‘like a home’.

²⁰ Julia Darling, *Private Papers* (1998).

²¹ Julia Darling, *Private Papers* (1992).

My memory is always of night and winter and resolution. A sense of definite purpose, despite suffering. To be allowed to stay that was all. To polish bits with silvo (how did the horses feel about the taste of silvo) and wrap the horses tails in bandages and be part of the world of forelock and stirrup and horse manure.²²

The figure of authority is represented by a 'voice' outside, occasionally summoning the girls to work, but while waiting to be called, 'we shut the door. We sat thick as thieves'.²³ There is an intimacy about this insular world of children and horses (and presumably secrets) from which adults are excluded and despite the evident disempowerment, there is also a transgressive note captured in the sense of collusion between the girls.

Consider another passage of inside and outside in which Darling dramatises in a few linguistic brushstrokes, the specificities of a 12-year-old child's thought processes. Entitled 'Workshop Piece', the description is of a game of hide-and-seek, played only by the narrator who is not interested in when she will be found, but whether anyone wants to find her. The narrator is outside on a rainy night, playing with her pet guinea pig, looking towards a house which seems full of light and life. 'It looked like a doll's house, all lit up and I could see the heads of my brothers bobbing about, my mother in the kitchen gesticulating, my Uncle Barry in the bedroom doing his weights. I was sitting next to an old freezer.'²⁴ The highly charged passage is written from the vantage point of a girl who has just reached puberty. 'I was annoyed with my bother Alan who had been using my computer, and changed the screensaver.

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Julia Darling, *Private Papers* (2003).

I had been cross all afternoon – my eyes itched, and I had a little dry cough that hurt. My arms were cold and goosepimply.²⁵ The reader becomes located inside the child's self-centered emotional state, gradually growing more isolated as time drifts on. Instead of going into her warm house, the narrator seeks autonomy and lifts the lid of the empty, disused freezer.

I had this idea that I would run away, but then I thought that maybe I would hide and see how much they missed me. I climbed inside the freezer, taking Marty with me. It was quite weird inside, much quieter than outside and I made sure I propped open the lid so that I could still breathe. I sat in the darkness and all I could hear were the comforting snuffles of Marty, and through the chink I could see the shed door and the wet shiny tree outside.²⁶

Here, the narrator has inverted the idea of escape – she is testing her family to see if they have 'run away' from her. Do they love her enough to look for her? Can the disempowered girl exert some sort of control or has she been abandoned? It is clear that she wants the reassurance of being searched for and located, of finding reunification and love, and consequently the child's game turns into a battle of wills.

Although cold and uncomfortable, she sits for a long time and sings all the songs she can remember – but she doesn't give in and expose her hiding place. As her loneliness increases, so do the depth of her anxieties, of being un-cared for and neglected: 'Outside it got darker and darker and I felt as if I got darker too.'²⁷ It is nearly midnight before Uncle Barry finds her, so the reader can envision a timeframe for the 'game' of around four or five hours. The final paragraph encapsulates the powerful feeling of blame, so characteristic of children. The narrator does not take

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

responsibility for her actions, rather she blames her family and the police, unimpressive in their lack of imagination, for ‘looking in the wrong places’.²⁸

It is unclear as to whether this recollection is a ‘real’ memory or fiction, however I understand it to be a conflation of both; the passage is a transformative site for the representation of self. The passage therefore reflects Sidonie Smith’s argument that when the autobiographer tells ‘the story she wants to tell about herself, she is seduced into a tantalising and yet elusive adventure that makes of her both creator and creation, writer and that which is written about’.²⁹ As Smith continues, life narrative contains a ‘trace of something from the past’³⁰ and such traces are evident in the adventure of ‘Workshop Piece’. Here, Darling displaces her subjectivity through the use of a highly effective narrative voice, asserting feelings of resentment and powerlessness, as she struggles with ideas of control and self-sufficiency. The narrator is an autobiographical character filtered through the lens of a woman, who in later life transgressed against her conservative upbringing both politically (as a Marxist) and sexually (as a lesbian).

The abiding recollection in ‘Workshop Piece’ is not the feeling of joy and relief at being discovered and presumably comforted, it is the thought of being trapped by one’s own actions in a kind of void. The passage concludes with the idea that there is no illumination to be found in the darkness, there is only quietness.

Darling writes: ‘I remember it so clearly – that quietness, that dark, thick absence of

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*, p.46.

³⁰ *ibid.*

everything. I don't know why I think of it now.'³¹ The final sentence indicates the self-reflective nature of Darling's writing, of the narrator being surprised by her own memories, which seem similar to unconscious eruptions. Darling has stepped outside her own story, an idea which author Micaela Maftai discusses in her book *The Fiction of Autobiography: Reading and Writing Identity*, in terms of writing *about* writing autobiographically.³² We must also place 'Workshop Piece' in the context of an illness narrative, as in the late 1990s Darling underwent aggressive chemotherapy after being diagnosed with breast cancer. At the time of writing 'Workshop Piece' Darling felt trapped by both the limits of her own body and also by the complex language of medicine (one of her final projects was co-editing *The Poetry Cure*, a collection which challenged patients to create their own vocabulary of pain). As Maftai suggests, writing has 'the ability to move the writer, and reader, back in time, but also functions as a way of forestalling death, a means of living beyond the decay of the bodily self'.³³ The concept of forestalling death through life narrative is more forcefully recognised by theorist Nancy K. Miller, for whom 'autobiography – identity through alterity – is also writing against death twice: the other's and one's own'.³⁴ Darling's 'Workshop Piece' was written in 2003, two years before she died aged 48, at a time when she was deeply aware of her mortality and most certainly 'writing against death' – at work on her unpublished novel, new short stories, poems and her final stage play.

³¹ Julia Darling, *Private Papers*, (2003).

³² Micaela Maftai, *The Fiction of Autobiography: Reading and Writing Identity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.4.

³³ *ibid*, p.29.

³⁴ Nancy K. Miller, 'Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography', *differences* 6.1 (1994), pp.1-27, (p. 12), cited in *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives: Reading Autobiography*, p. 138.

This leads us to consider the idea of logical continuity between the narrative of past and present identity, in this case represented by a moment threatened by nonexistence, in which the prison is both body and self.

‘I return home, dirty and guilty’

In ‘Workshop Piece’ a vulnerable girl engineers her own imprisonment, representing a kind of escape, but one in which her world becomes more confined. The feeling of suffocation experienced in the chest freezer does not lead to liberation; however it does elicit emotional transformation. Discovering the ‘thick absence of everything’ signifies a mature awareness of self, conflicting with the childish petulance belied in the view that ‘they looked in all the wrong places’.³⁵ We turn now from passages such as ‘Workshop Piece’ and ‘Tack Room’, which both represent fragments of self-authorship within the notebooks, to the next stage in Darling’s life narration. For a rebellious adolescent, the willful subversion of hide-and-seek becomes more a game of chase, and the narrator’s world expands as she discovers new ways to put distance between herself and her family. Writing in 2003, Darling devoted four pages to an episodic sequence of passages numbering one to 15, entitled ‘JULIA’. I would argue that by shaping a life into a list, dating from early childhood through to the moment she left the family home, Darling was able to make unambiguous causal connections between transformative moments. I do not contend that ‘JULIA’ is a simple descriptive chronology of events, but it is an unusual piece of writing due to the continuity it provides from childhood to young adulthood. Perhaps Darling wrote

³⁵ Julia Darling, *Private Papers* (2003).

‘JULIA’ after re-reading the selves contained in the pages of previous journals, linking together fragmented passages (omitting some and introducing others in an edit of self). Thus, after many years of narrativising herself in her notebooks this storytelling sequence examines the discrete stages of development on the path to maturity. The formal structure of ‘JULIA’ may be placed within the context of Sidonie Smith’s discussion of the ways in which memories and fictions interconnect. Smith suggests the woman’s autobiographical project is characterised by ‘four marks of fictiveness’– ‘the fictions of memory, of the “I”, of the imagined reader, of the story.’³⁶ We can consider Darling’s life writing in the light of these ‘four marks’, in particular with reference to the idea of exploring selfhood through the theatricality of fictive voices. Smith describes a writer coming to terms with her own past as rendering ‘in words the confrontation between the dramatic present and the narrative past, between the psychological pressures of discourse and the narrative pressures of story’.³⁷ Such confrontation existed for Darling, who was writing a narrative of her adolescent years while immersed in the dramatic present of parenting two daughters in their early teens. As she pointed out in ‘Small Beauties’, an essay about motherhood and creativity: ‘My writing day starts with a list of worries and demands that every mother is familiar with.’³⁸ For Darling, writing was an escape from the mundane and self-dramatisation was, perhaps, one way of dealing with the narrative pressures of story creation.

³⁶ Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 1987), p.45.

³⁷ *ibid*, p. 46.

³⁸ Julia Darling ‘Small Beauties’ in *The Fruits of Labour: Creativity, Self-Expression and Motherhood*, ed. by Penny Sumner (London: The Women’s Press, 2001), p.1.

To return to the self-disclosure inherent in an episodic sequence, it is interesting to see how 'JULIA' demonstrates how the writer fused her imagination with her lived experience – shaped by memory – into a cohesive narrative. Early childhood recollections listed in 'JULIA' include the ordinary, such as the grace recited before school dinner: 'For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful.'³⁹ Such everydayness contrasts with the idiosyncratic, including the idea that 'all teachers are clockwork. They are wound up each morning and kept in boxes at night'.⁴⁰ 'JULIA' also contains the irrational, such as the disconcerting fear that 'my mother will descend upside down, down the chimney with scary dead eyes.'⁴¹ The individual numbered passages describing specific moments in a child's life are framed stylistically by the author, who was situating herself with a certain amount of self-irony, within this processual text. Here we can understand Smith's 'four marks of fictiveness' interacting, as the fictions of memory are crafted into stories and dialogue takes place between the 'I' who is demonstrating her technique to the imagined reader (herself).

We can consider another aspect of Darling's life narrative by focusing on the final four passages of 'JULIA' (numbers 12 to 15 in the list), which represent an adolescent's struggle against a patriarchal system of values in the 1960s. Number 12 reads: 'I would like to burn down the grammar school for girls, Winchester College, Winchester Cathedral and dance naked in the smouldering ashes, and have the rest of

³⁹ Julia Darling, *Private Papers* (1999).

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

the population scared of me, and do whatever I say'.⁴² In this strident, euphoric statement, Darling asserted revolutionary fervor in a desire to topple the conventions of the old order – the institutions of school, state and church – and to dance in the ashes of it all. She wanted to remove herself from the dominion of her teachers, her father's power (he was Physics Master at Winchester College) and from theological authority – not only the everyday prayers and hymns of school assembly but also the rituals of High Church. This rebellious fantasy involved breaking down the structures of authority, the bricks and mortar symbolic of her home city of Winchester where she felt imprisoned by the importance of historical buildings. The Darlings lived in the city centre, on College Street, in the Georgian house where Jane Austen died, and it is perhaps unsurprising that a subversive teenager would wish to free herself from the weight of heritage and associated expectations of duty and respect.

The next passage (number 13) continues the theme of a struggle for independence, with a description of the entrapment involved in being driven to a girls' boarding school by her father: 'wailing and screaming the whole way while he drives implacably wearing a hat and ignores me, abandoning me by the big oak door in Letchworth'.⁴³ It's worth noting that the destination is not Winchester Grammar School (from which she had previously run away), but a church boarding school in Hertfordshire, 100 miles from Darling's home. Reminiscent of the lonely suffocation involved with being hidden in a chest freezer, the narrator is physically and psychologically enclosed in her father's car. However, this time it is against her will and during the emotional car journey, she gives up on any intention to please her

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ *ibid.*

father. In doing so, she is not merely struggling for a voice, but screaming for one. Ultimately the narrator is powerless in her desire to be heard and silenced when faced with the big oak front door. The narrator's resistance is ignored and her subjectivity is suppressed, until such time that she can find a new way of interpreting herself.

This crisis is followed by the somewhat inevitable next stage of her life, listed as number 14, the complete defiance of patriarchal authority in a scene in which the mother has become resigned to her child's transgression.

After running away for the hundredth time I return home, dirty and guilty and find the rest of the family watching TV. My Mum says "Hello, nice to see you back," and doesn't make a scene. A short time later I am able to leave home for good.⁴⁴

Here the narrator remains isolated, rather like the 12-year-old who sees light and life inside her house on a dark, rainy night, but this time she returns home to find her family all involved in the same activity. This remains a portrait of exclusion, as she is the dirty and guilty one; estranged from her family in body and conscience. The journey of 'JULIA', which began with the little girl saying grace before her mince and dumplings and the adolescent fantasising of dancing in the ashes of her upbringing, concludes with assertiveness and confidence. Number 15 in the sequence shows Darling narrating herself as an active subject: a woman who has escaped institutional oppression and radically changed her circumstances.

I live in a caravan on the south coast with my eternal friend Janet. We wear loose clothes that do not scratch our middles and do what we like. I don't have to stand still to have my photograph taken. I lie on the bed and sing.

In the denouement of 'JULIA', Darling wrote her own future and announced her liberation. She was free from church and school, living instead within the thin panels

⁴⁴ Julia Darling, *Private Papers* (1999).

of a caravan by the sea – emblematic of a holiday where no rules apply. Her clothes are loose, unlike school uniform with its tight waistband, heavy blazer and constricting hat. The narrator is no longer the marginalised child hiding in an empty freezer waiting to be discovered. She can invent her own life and do as she likes. The passage is idealised – there is no mention of how this life would be financed – yet the omission of practicalities is central to the affirmation of subjectivity and rejection of the cultural norms of family life. The narrator is unconfined, not even contained in the space of a photograph, for which she would have to stop moving or fidgeting and stand still. She has reconstructed her life and a new story of empowerment can be written, or more accurately sung.

The reference to singing is not without significance, as Darling wrote song lyrics throughout her life and her final piece for the stage was ‘A Manifesto for a New City’, a musical play written in 2004, featuring songs such as ‘The Song of Living Dangerously,’ ‘Don’t Be Sorry for the Men’ and ‘The Language of We’. Theatricality, along with musicality, are central to Darling’s writing, and the speaking aloud of her work re-evokes the emotional and embodied qualities of the texts. Turning to Nancy K. Miller’s essay ‘Writing Fictions: Women’s Autobiography in France’ we find a question which resonates with the ways in which Darling’s notebooks acted as springboards to her published work: ‘How does a woman writer perform on the stage of her text?’⁴⁵ Miller asks what governs the ‘production of a female self as *theater*’ and her suggestion is that a ‘*double* reading – of the autobiography with the fiction –

⁴⁵ Nancy K. Miller, ‘Writing Fictions: Women’s Autobiography in France’, in *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography*, ed. by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (London: Cornell University Press, 1988), p.48.

would provide a more sensitive apparatus for deciphering a female self'.⁴⁶ Darling's multi-faceted notebooks are often polyvocal and fragmented, but on occasion, as with 'JULIA', her life narrative takes on the form of a 'play' with clearly structured scenes. It is almost as if Darling was considering Miller's question: 'how do I perform on the stage of my text?' In this case, 'JULIA' is a symbolic account of non-conformity, resistance and liberation, and the performance involves fighting for and discovering self-expression in language, voice and melody.

The dramatic representation of self is also explored by Sidonie Smith who posits in her essay 'Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance' that the 'autobiographical subject is amnesiac, incoherent, heterogeneous, interactive' and it is exactly this failure, which leads to performativity in the 'disruptive space' of the unconscious.⁴⁷ It is this disruptive space which Darling discovered, when she 'gouged' out her first short story while at a writing retreat and became aware of the powerful connection between the unconscious and memory in the creation of narrative.⁴⁸ As biographers Bronwyn Davies and Susanne Gannon assert in their discussion of Professor of Ethnography Stephen Muecke's observations in *Doing Collective Biography*: 'Although our memory stories are not "fictional" (in the sense that they are generated through memory rather than imagination), they tap into the art of fiction-writing to the extent that they attempt to work with *percepts* rather than

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ Sidonie Smith 'Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance,' in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, p.108-115, (p.110).

⁴⁸ Julia Darling, 'Small Beauties,' p. 7.

concepts'.⁴⁹ Like Miller, Muecke also references the theatrical as he writes of how the percepts of literature chase the concepts of literary criticism, crossing imperceptibly and taking on each others features, so that, 'successive masking and unmasking' may create enchantment.⁵⁰ Muecke's assertion casts light on Darling's multidimensional writing, which was often embodied through sensory perception; evocative sounds, intense smells and vibrant colours were central elements of narrative recollection in the notebooks.

This dialogue between the sensory and the textual is evident in 'JULIA', where Darling encompasses the roles of both actor and narrator. Written in linear form as a transformative sequence, 'JULIA' is of course, a framework for a highly selective coming-of-age story. Furthermore, I have chosen specific passages relevant to my own construction of Darling's narrative. For the writer, the authorial choice of events, particularly when considering what to omit, was vital, and the sequence of 'JULIA' demonstrates how she interpreted her material and crafted it into shape based on artistic rather than moral decision-making. Within the fragmented and process-based medium of a notebook, Darling strove for a unified and cohesive story of an artist coming to self-consciousness. Furthermore, writing the self was crucial in the development of Darling's debut novel, *Crocodile Soup*, which insists on the autobiographical as its artistic origin. In a period of languor, the novel's protagonist Gertrude states: 'I rewrote my messy life in chronological sequences, then scrumpled

⁴⁹ *Doing Collective Biography*, ed. by Bronwyn Davies and Susanne Gannon (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006), p.65.

⁵⁰ Stephen Muecke, 'The fall: ficticritical writing', *Parallax*, 25 (4): 108–112 (2002), cited in *Doing Collective Biography*, p.109.

it up'.⁵¹ The complex intertextuality here between fiction and life writing involves the rejection of autobiography; Gertrude is unhappy with her self-representation and ruins the paper it is written on, although she doesn't reveal why. I believe this is apposite to Gertrude's author, whose 'messy life' has stood the test of time: 'JULIA' is a strategy of empowerment, invoking the adolescent crisis of identity, the impassioned patriarchal confrontation and the affirmative denouement.

'The imagination of childhood'

The private worlds within Darling's journals reveal how she accessed memories of childhood and created dramatic narratives through the act of writing. This essay has explored how the writer considered the dynamic processes and politics of growing up and how pathways for power sought as an adolescent were forged through the creation of and control over her own subversive life narratives. As Carolyn G. Heilbrun states in her book *Writing a Woman's Life*: 'Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter'.⁵² Positioning herself in the discourse was crucial to Darling, and narrative recollection provided the means of interpreting the self as playing a part which did matter. I would argue that the writer who ran away from school, eventually dropping out with few qualifications, made use of her pen as a self-conscious strategy for gaining agency over her past, present and future. This essay contends that, for

⁵¹ Julia Darling, *Crocodile Soup* (Houghton le Spring, Mayfly Press: 2015) p.67.

⁵² Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (London: The Women's Press, 1988), p.18.

Darling, writing was a means of placing herself centre stage – no longer the alienated child or aspiring writer at the margins of a literary life.

The key to gaining agency over her own narrative was, for Darling, a return to the re-imagination of a childhood perspective. Paradoxically, the power contained in writing her own subjectivity as an adult became coupled with the power of the child's imagination. A list of workshop ideas recorded by Darling in 1997 includes 'Keeping the imagination of childhood'⁵³ which indicates a correlation between the temporal framework of the child and the 'present' of recollection. For Darling, the imagination was not something in hiding, waiting to be discovered, nor does *keeping* suggest a return to the imagination of childhood or even its recollection – rather, it is the retention of the child's imaginative powers. This resistance to the effacement of the childhood imagination over time powered Darling's published and private writing and helped shape connection between recovering the past and creating the present, binding fragments of identity to form a writing self.

Perhaps, for Darling, the gulf between the narrating 'I' and the narrated 'I' was partially bridged by such imaginative retention. Clearly the child is not narrating her stories, however in a similar way to the controlling, narrating 'I', the writer's consciousness was also fluctuating and in process. Sidonie Smith describes how the narrating 'I' may occupy 'multiple, at times contradictory, subject positions.'⁵⁴ This idea is reflected in Darling's imaginative self-authorship, where the distinction between object and subject appears to collapse, and leads us to consider whether the consciousness has the potential to occupy multiple subject positions. Discussing the

⁵³ Julia Darling, *Private Papers* (1997).

⁵⁴ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, p.73.

complex literary and psychological processes involved in diary writing in *A Day at a Time*, Margo Culley argues that it is ‘a paradox that the process whose frequent goal is to establish self-continuity involves at its heart a dislocation from the self, or a turning of subject into object’.⁵⁵ Within Darling’s life narrative, the self views and examines the self (in different time periods in addition to the present) and the self is also the audience. For Culley the dislocation from the self is a ‘double consciousness’⁵⁶ which is connected to two processes, that of selection – in which the diarist chooses which details to write to create a particular persona – and that of the reconstruction of reality in which periodic text ‘represents a continuous present’.⁵⁷ Darling’s life narratives also represent a continuous past, layered by different versions of memories, creating resonances both in her present and future, a process in which the reader is also involved.

Darling was a writer whose work had fluid boundaries: a short story might become a radio play, a piece of prose could find new form as a poem and life narrative would be fictionalised as a novel. The notebooks epitomise this fluidity and one can argue that memories of childhood are not ‘accurate’ representations of events, but rather a fusion of fiction and life writing in which something new was created. In *Autobiography*, Professor Linda Anderson writes of diaries as speculative, ‘a writing towards a writing which has not yet happened’,⁵⁸ and Darling’s journals allow, and indeed prepare for, new and unbounded creative work. One can almost hear the

⁵⁵ Margo Culley, ‘Introduction’, *A Day at a Time: Diary Literature of American Women, from 1764 to the Present*, p.10.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p.20.

⁵⁸ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.94.

ensemble of male and female voices emerging from within Darling's private papers, many of whom are shaped into fuller form as characters in her plays, short stories and novels. It is therefore interesting that as a life narrator – particularly when considering the constraints of daughterhood alongside her own ideology as mother – Darling strove towards a coherency of voice.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson assert that life narrators are performing the rhetorical acts of 'justifying their own perceptions, upholding their reputations, disputing the accounts of others, settling scores, conveying cultural information, and inventing desirable futures'.⁵⁹ We may appraise Darling's journals in these terms, the last of which is most apposite when considering her writing about childhood. The coming-of-age narrative 'JULIA' demonstrates the processes of transformation towards just such a future. Here, the drama of the self is represented by evocative passages in which Darling shapes her resistance to the status quo in a quest for recognition and visibility. She thereby strives toward the creation of a stable subject within the fragmented mode of autobiographical storytelling. The adolescent in Darling's narratives seeks liberation from her situation, just as the professional writer hoped for the freedom to control her artistic self-expression and for her work to confound the distinctions of genre norms.

As this essay has explored, for Darling the self was a work in progress, an ongoing performance in negotiation with external factors. It is useful to place this analysis in the context of Sidonie Smith's idea that 'the self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an *effect* of autobiographical

⁵⁹ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, p.13.

storytelling'.⁶⁰ This is persuasive when viewing Darling's construction of a rebellious, subversive and confident identity, a self which defies conventions. Smith writes that the self is not a noun 'waiting to be materialized through the text'⁶¹ and, moreover, that self-identity does not emerge from psychic interiority within the narrating subject. She argues that there is 'no essential, original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating. Nor is the autobiographical self-expressive in the sense that it is the manifestation of an interiority that is somehow ontologically whole, seamless and "true".⁶² Here, Smith reframes Judith Butler's discussion about the gender performativity in her influential book *Bodies That Matter* as 'autobiographical performativity'⁶³ and reiterates the idea that it is helpful 'to approach autobiographical telling as a performative act'.⁶⁴

This concept was located in Darling's lived experience; before she was a writer of fiction she was a performance poet and playwright. This essay may focus on a private archive, but it is written in the awareness that she was in dialogue with her performative self, the one who would breathe life into a poem on stage or give dialogue to an actor, in turn creating new forms of expression for the written word. Darling's methods of self-representation were embodied in the theatre in front of live audiences where connecting the text with voice enabled her to reproduce the intimacy of writing, encouraging collaboration and canceling out the distance between herself

⁶⁰ Sidonie Smith 'Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance,' *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, p.109.

⁶¹ *ibid.* p.108.

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*, p.109.

⁶⁴ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, p.61.

and her readers. We have seen that in her notebooks, Darling collaborated with both the archives of memory and imagination in the processes of autobiographical subjectivity. Making use of theatrical techniques, she applied modes of dramatic structure to the interpersonal interactions described in her life narratives, in which autobiographical selves are persuasively constructed, framed and staged.

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