

2024

The Language of Suffering: A Review of Ghost Words and Invisible Giants by Lheisa Dustin

Jill Darling

University of Michigan - Dearborn, jill.darling@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Darling, Jill (2024) "The Language of Suffering: A Review of Ghost Words and Invisible Giants by Lheisa Dustin," *Criticism*: Vol. 65: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol65/iss2/6>

THE LANGUAGE OF SUFFERING

Jill Darling

Ghost Words and Invisible Giants
by Lheisa Dustin. Madison, NJ:
Fairleigh Dickinson University
Press, 2021. Pp. 308. \$133.00
hardback.

Lheisa Dustin's *Ghost Words and Invisible Giants* expands scholarship on H.D.'s *The Sword Went Out to Sea* and *Helen in Egypt* and Djuna Barnes's *Ryder* and *Nightwood* to consider the authors' psychological and emotional suffering in relation to formal strategies, characters, and narrative content in their work. Through extensive research, Dustin investigates these deeper biographies without pathologizing H.D. and Barnes, offering provocative and thoughtful extended readings on their modernist texts. She builds on earlier scholarship, foregrounding "feminist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-imperialist modernism" (26), queerness, and more, and engages in nonsymbolist and nonnarrative formal strategies, such as repetition, fragmentation, and association. Dustin's readings also show complex relations among rejection, abuse, and writing as practice; for H.D. and Barnes, writing was necessary for negotiating trauma, though ultimately inadequate for allowing these writers to fully heal or find closure. Exploring "unconscious or semi-conscious processes" while recognizing limits of psychoanalytic perspectives, Dustin uses Lacan's and others' ideas of "psychotic processes" to read H.D. and examines "cryptophoria" in Barnes's work "as a patterning in creativity and agency rather than as a clinical category" (27). Dustin also reflects on the various religious, spiritual, and occultist beliefs and

practices that are woven through their experiences, language, and writing.

Taking such an approach to the work of H.D. and Barnes is a risky endeavor, which pays off. Although scholarly study has often focused on psychobiographies of any number of male writers of the twentieth century, the work of H.D. and Barnes, like many of their female precursors and contemporaries, was already marginalized before being recovered for serious study. Further marginalizing or distracting from the literary work by focusing on “madness” or psychoemotional instability is not Dustin’s project. As she argues, because traumatic experience and alternative kinds of knowledge played such important roles in the construction of these texts, their influence needs to be more seriously acknowledged.

The first two chapters of *Ghost Words* offer in-depth readings of H.D.’s *The Sword Went Out to Sea* and *Helen in Egypt*. Dustin shows how although formally very different, both books deal with Lord Hugh Caswall Tremeneere Dowding’s rejection of H.D., her psychoanalysis with Freud and later breakdowns and clinic stays, and her engagement with “spirit messages” received from “dead Royal Air Force (RAF) pilots and from a spirit” she called Z (39). H.D. believed that she was responsible for World War II and that

she needed Dowding to decode the RAF messages to end the war and save herself and the world. His rejection of her request to interpret the messages results in obsessive repetition of that rejection, played through many characters and storylines and a variety of aesthetic devices. Dustin claims that in *Sword*, *Helen in Egypt*, and some other works by H.D., rejection played an important role in larger processes of reintegration of “the heroines’ fractured selves” (40), with the female characters always versions of H.D. and the male characters versions of Dowding and sometimes other men. However, in these works, as Dustin explains, the desire for “resolution” instead continuously “gives way to new problems, new possibilities” (41). Drawing further parallels between H.D.’s *Sword* and *Helen in Egypt* and Daniel Paul Schreber’s *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, Dustin points out that “H.D.’s vision of possession by God, ghosts, and spirits is similar to Schreber’s in that both evidence the impingement of something unassimilable into psychic life” (56). While the language in *Sword* “is always already the language of the unconscious, ‘ghosting for’ absent meaning” (58), the book’s main character, Delia, searches for meaning through “psychoanalysis, religion, history, legend and myth” (65). And while H.D. may have used writing as a means of recovery, self-understanding, and finding

meaning, it instead seemed to result in repetition of the traumatic event or even, after Lacan, "delusion," as Dustin observes (106).

A long poem, with prose introductions beginning each piece, *Helen in Egypt* "has little narrative or setting, and what there is shifts like a dream" (120). The main characters, Helen and Achilles, correspond to H.D. and Dowding, and the book "is composed mostly of questions, answers, and admonitions that do not have a clear relation to one another or to the scenes or actions of the poem, though relations are implied" (120). Central to Dustin's reading of *Helen in Egypt* is the rape of Helen by Achilles, which also represents Dowding's repudiation of H.D. While other scholars have focused less, if at all, on the rape, Dustin argues that "the poem has no temporal dimension, 'no before and no after,' but 'only the ever-recurring 'eternal moment,'" the moment of the rape" (153). For H.D. and the many female characters in the book, the rape comes to represent everything: castration and subjugation as well as birth and meaning (132), the cause of and the potential for ending the war (178), and ultimately "the poem itself, the perfectly beautiful offspring of these physical embodiments of 'War' and 'Love' or 'Beauty'" (178). Out of the repetition and circularity of violence and trauma can in fact emerge the "perfect,

beautiful civilization, which is also perfect artistic production" (178).

In chapters 3 and 4, Dustin turns to Djuna Barnes's *Ryder* and *Nightwood*, works that incorporate strategies similar to H.D.'s, including fragmentation, circularity, disconnection between signifiers and signifieds, and multiplicity versus oneness (189). These works also foreground Barnes's likely sexual abuse by her grandmother and others and writing as a way of negotiating trauma. Following Abraham and Torok, Dustin uses the idea of the "psychic crypt: a half-secret, an aporia in the discourse" to interpret the haunting of characters and language and the mediation of the unaddressable "open secret" of incest enacted in textual form.

Dustin points to Cathy Caruth's use of Freud, Lacan, and Paul de Man to show how Barnes's incorporation of "images of falling and departing" represent traumatic repetition (198) and that "narrative fragmentation, ambiguous language . . . images of gaps and dualities," silence, and more attempt to reconcile the unconscious and conscious, knowing and not knowing. However, the characters in both *Ryder* and *Nightwood*, as "cryptophores," remain continually "split and haunted by the ghosts of their loved ones" (205). Further, Barnes draws attention to the problem of "psychic boundaries" in *Ryder* (200). Characters acting within disjunctive narratives fill

space with physical presence or language that results in ghostly haunting. Repulsive and lurid images, including excrement and “fetishistic fantasy,” further shock and resist narrative progression (198). And, as Dustin explains, “women in *Ryder*, who internalize ideals of feminine beauty or saintliness, are destroyed by the bodily impossibility of accommodating them; their repressed parts come back out screaming” (220)—which, for example, she reads through images of childbirth, which often signal splitting, death, and melancholia.

Although filled with different characters, these psychotextual strategies persist through *Nightwood*, yet by its end “ghost words cease to ‘haunt’ and, instead, take over character behavior, and present as madness” (234). As Dustin asserts, the lack of direct communication takes effect instead through characters’ behaviors, interactions, and syntax, and at the center of *Nightwood* remains the “shameful love and secret, and the words that give it half-life” (233). Saturated with the effects of “phantoms” and the open secrets of abuse, images of “bowing down” before others who stand above, visible “distortions and gaps of language” as well as “holes, fractures, graves, ghosts” and other devices show increasing despair

(263). While creative practice and formal experimentation, Dustin concedes, may have been helpful to Barnes’s negotiation and representation of trauma (263), it may not have helped her to actually recover or get past that trauma. Although the work may be read as creating empowering counternarratives, as some scholars suggest, it also, according to Dustin, seems unable to go beyond haunting doubt and repetition, which becomes apparent in the language and imagery that devolve instead of aid in recovery.

Reading beyond binary modes of interpretation, Dustin shows us that a network of influences on H.D. and Barnes—including modernist aesthetic experiment, traumatic suffering, alternative and spiritual knowledge systems, and more—led to these challenging and brilliant texts, and as scholars, we need to continue to find value in humanizing our subjects. Reading through and beyond literary mastery in these ways can also help us reflect more deeply on what it means to have “agency.”

Jill Darling has published poetry, fiction, and creative and critical essays and is the author of Geographies of Identity: Narrative Forms, Feminist Futures; (re)iterations; and a geography of syntax. Darling teaches at the University of Michigan–Dearborn. More info and links to some of her work can be found at jilldarling.com.