Convention in Dada: Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and her German poems in the *Little Review*

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Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven – "the only figure of our generation who deserves the epithet extraordinary"[i]

Margaret Anderson, Editor of the *Little Review*

Recently scholars have celebrated the long ignored Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven as Baroness Elsa, the Queen of Dada. Her extravagance in appearance and poetics as well as her body-art are no longer seen as anomalous to the modernist movement; rather, scholars reclaim the Baroness as a "notorious and outrageous performance artist [and] important and vibrant artistic medium in which to examine the cultural contributions of Modernist women in the twenties"(Gammel, Transgressive Body Talk 92). While the Baroness and her art have been unacknowledged for decades, scholars have now woken her up – virtually as sleeping beauty - and have crowned her the "first American Dada" (Gammel, Biography 4). The Baroness' reputation for poetry as wild as her costumes originates from her English poetry. This poetry in her second language is "relentlessly original and provocative in [its] expressions," (Gammel, Biography 4) and raises the questions of 'art or anti-art?' and 'poetry or antipoetry?' (Gammel, Biography 7) Her large amount of German poetry lays unnoticed by scholarship and has never been translated (Reiss 91). The three German poems, "Das finstere Meer," "Irrender König," and "Walküren," published in the *Little Review*, however, show the Baroness in a different light.

They contain rhyme, meter, and stanzas, and are conventional in their content. These three poems suggest that, whereas her Dada poems in English assaulted an American reader's aesthetic and moral sensibilities, her German poems, despite the more conventional form issue a more deadly attack on the German language and culture.

The first scholar to reclaim the Baroness, Robert Reiss, writes in "My Baroness: Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven," that the Baroness' work is "the embodiment of Dada" (Reiss 89). But in the last decade, the scholarship is dominated by Irene Gammel, who rediscovered the Baroness as a long forgotten artist. Gammel reconfigures modernism "by including the formerly unacknowledged roles played by women" (Gammel, German Extravagance 61). In various essays Gammel promotes the Baroness as a "literary warrior," (German Extravagance 61) who has finally been given the "belated credit denied [her] during [her] life time" (Transgressive Body Talk 73).

The Baroness, as Elsa Plötz (Gammel, Biography 21), came to be known, arrived in New York sometime before the outbreak of the First World War, where she became one of the "uninhibited inhabitants of Greenwich Village" (Reiss 81). In the New York's *avant-garde* circles she was known for her wild and frequently nude appearances, her costumes and her frequent confrontations with the public, the police, and her lovers. Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven was an object of much gossip, scandal, and curiosity (Gammel, Transgressive Body Talk 74). One day the Baroness, and with her the artistic movement of Dada, walked into the 'life' of the *Little Review* and, "from 1917-1923, Else figured prominently on the pages of the *Little Review*" (Gammel, Extravagance 61). In the twenties, the *Little Review* published more poems by Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven than by any other poet – most of the poems written in English

(McKible 5). Margaret Anderson vividly recalls the Baroness' first entrance into the magazine's office:

> So she shaved her head. Next she lacquered it a high vermilion. Then she stole the crêpe from the house of mourning and made a dress of it. She came to see us. First she exhibited the head at all angles, amazing against our black walls. Then she jerked the crepe with one movement. It's better when I'm nude, she said. (Anderson 211)

With the Baroness, the *Little Review* had not taken in just a new artist, but the "First American dada" (Heap, *LR*, Spring 1922). Dada, born out of the horror of the First World War, shook the Western world with "iconoclastic experiments in art, with anarchic nonsense in literature, and with outrageous personality experiments" (Gammel, Biography 10). Her being German, "the Baroness knew first-hand [and] in her very bones," of the cultural disjunction that had resulted from the War (Reiss 92). Dada and its "celebration of chaos, madness, and nothingness" had found a voice in the Baroness' English poetry, which evoked outraged critical and public outcries (Gammel, Biography 10). In January 1922, Harriet Monroe writes, "The *Little Review* never knows when to stop. Just now it seems to be headed straight toward Dada; but we can forgive even that if it would drop Else von Freytag-Loringhoven on the way" (Monroe, *Poetry,* Jan.1922, 227). Jane Heap angrily replies, "[W]e do intend to drop the baroness - right into the middle of the history of American poetry!"(Heap, *LR*, Spring 1922, 46). In 1921 Ezra Pound warns Margaret Anderson that "´no idiots' should be included in the upcoming Dada number in the *Little Review*" (Pound, 1988 268)[ii]. The Baroness' Dadaist English poetry "sparked one of the [*Little Review's*] most extensive and exciting debates," and has often been interpreted as assault on America (McKible 4). But it also produced "an art that was thoroughly comparative, always committed to renewal and experimentation" (Gammel,

German Extravagance 72). In the meantime, scholarship, while praising her commitment to experimentation and renewal, as well as her contemporaries, while debating her status as an artist, did not notice that the use of her native German created poems with rhyme, meter, stanzas, and highly conventional content.

In its September/December 1920 issue, the *Little Review* published several English poems and one German poem by the Baroness. “Appalling Heart” – written in English – is one of the Baroness’ provocative Dada poems, which contributed to the heated discussion about her. The poem is merely a sequence of English words, mainly verbs in the progressive tense, “tripping – swishing- frolicking- /courtesing – careening – brushing - /flowing – lying down- bending“(4-6). It consists of three ‘stanzas’ of seventeen, eleven and one lines. The typical Subject-Predicate-Object sentence structure is not recognizable in this poem, in “in space blue - rides she away from mine chest” (15) she puts the predicate (rides) before the subject (she) as it would be done in German, but not in English. The Baroness also ignores English grammar rules. For example, she leaves out the third person singular “s” as in ‘City stir’ (1) as well as the plural s as in ‘in night lonely’ (10). In “in night lonely,” she also violates the rule for word order, as she reverses the rule that in English the adjective precedes the noun it modifies. Except for two exclamation marks and two colons, the dashes are the only punctuation mark used.

The Baroness also seems to play with ‘denglish,’ that is, a blending of English and German roots in a neologism. ‘Herbstained,’ (2) for example, cannot be found in an English dictionary, but a reader with knowledge of German recognizes the word ‘herbst,’ which means fall. The second component of this neologism is the English adverb ‘stained.’ A large amount of the compounds she uses cannot be found in an English dictionary. From the verses “Herbstained - Flowerstained -/ shellscented – seafaring-/ foresthunting – junglewise,” (18-20) only seafaring

is an actual, grammatically correct compound. In order to retain the parallel structure of noun-verb compounds, the Baroness creates new compounds, meanwhile ignoring that they are not existent as compounds in English and that a prepositional phrase should be used instead (hunting in the forest).

In the same issue, the *Little Review* also published a German poem by Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. In opposition to “Appalling Hearts,” “Das finstere Meer” contains consistent stanzas, rhyme, and meter. “Das finstere Meer” ostensibly appears to consist of three stanzas, but according to its rhyme scheme, content, and sentence structure, the long last stanza can be divided into three stanzas. So, the poem actually contains five stanzas each with four verses.

This apportionment of the poem is underlined by its rhyme-scheme. The poem follows an alternate end-rhyme scheme with the pattern, A-B-A-B, C-D-C-D. For example, in the first stanza ‘Strande’ rhymes with ‘Lande’ and ‘schwer’ with ‘Meer’. This is carried forward in the following stanzas.

“Das Finstere Meer”	“The sinister sea”
(An Vater)	(To Father)
Wir fuhren am finstern Strande	We drove along the sinister seaside
Der Himmel hing wolkenschwer	The sky hung heavy with clouds
Die Wellen rollten zum Lande	The waves beat on the land
Und rannen zurück in das Meer	And flowed back into the ocean

Despite some inconsistency, the meter of alternating dactyls and iambs can be applied to the poem. This meter is especially evident in the forth stanza. This stanza has four verses each with three metrical feet. Verse one and four follow the pattern dactyl – dactyl – iamb, so that in the

first verse the stress is on ‘Mei’, ‘schü,’ and ‘See.’ Verse two and four have three iambic metrical feet. Only the word ‘Melodie’ breaks this pattern as it has three syllables. In verse two for example the stress is on ‘Mö,’ ‘schrei,’ and ‘wie.’ This metrical system enforces the rhyme scheme of stanza four.

Meine verschüttete Seele	My buried soul
Möchte schreien wie sie	Wants to scream like her
In ihrer heiseren Kehle	In her hoarse voice
Pfiff des Orkans Melodie	Whistles the hurricane’s melody

The poem also contains a recognizable German sentence structure and all words have their proper word endings. As German is an analytical and not a synthetic language, proper word endings are very important to recognize the meaning of the sentence. In English, as it is synthetic, the strict S-P-O structure has to be followed. While the Baroness ignores English grammar rules and word order in her Dada poetry, as shown in “Appaling Hearts,” she applies them to her German poem “Das finstere Meer.”

While the meaning of “Appaling Hearts” is hard to grasp, “Das finstere Meer” allows readers artless access to its content. This poem can be understood in the context of her relationship with her father. The dedication ‘an Vater’ (to Father) as subtitle of the poem, makes this clear. Therefore, one can easily identify ‘den Feind am Knie’(the enemy at the heels) in stanza five as her father, whom the Baroness described as “violent-tempered, intemperate, generous, bighearted, meanly cruel, revengeful, traditionally honest in business”(Gammel, Biography 32).

Warum meines Herzens Gedanken	Why my heart’s thoughts
Mögt ihr nicht blitzen wie sie	Don’t you twinkle like her

Oh warum trä(u)men und kranken	Oh why dream and sicken
Mit dem Feind am Knie.	With the enemy at the heels.

But the content of the poem is less important than the form. In contrast to her Dada poetry, this German poem meets all the poetic conventions. It has consistent stanzas, rhyme and meter - all of which contrasts sharply with her English poems. Perhaps the best way to solve this discrepancy between her English and her German poetry is that her lunatic Dada constructions are due to a lack of knowledge of the English language. The Baroness did not learn English before the age of thirty-seven, when she came to the U.S. in 1911 and thus the conclusion that her art of madness originated in a deficit of knowledge, lays at hand (Gammel, Limbswishing Dada 3; Lappin 560). But it would be too easy to dismiss one of the most controversial figures of modernism and her ‘outrageous’/ ‘vibrant’ art simply with a lack of knowledge of English as it is possible, even with limited skills, to produce something more meaningful (Gammel, Extravagant Body Talk 92).

Even sharper than in the Sep. /Dec. issue, is the contrast between her English and German poetry in the *Little Review's* issue of March 1920, where only two poems of the Baroness were published. “Irrender König,” written in German, and “Klink - Hratzvenga, Narin – Tzarissamanili,” written in English, were printed on the same page so that a reader would face an antithetical picture.

Although “Irrender König” no longer has such a clear rhyme scheme as “Das finstere Meer,” it is still a lot more regular than “Klink- Hratzvenga.” It has a clear structure of five stanzas, which go along with the content. The poem’s body follows the conventional structure of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. In the first stanza, the thesis is introduced, which is that the kings is lost without the narrator, and as the narrator identifies herself with the country, the king

is lost without his land: "Ohne mich ist deine Krone verloren." In the second stanza the mood changes, and the antithesis is stated: the narrator/land suffers from the loss of its king: "Ich – dein Land – bin ohne König verloren." Stanzas three and four function as an interlude, looking back retrospectively on the king's former life. The last stanza is the synthesis revealing the true nature of the king as a ghost and a foul: "Ohne Gepränge bis[t] du ein Schalksnarr/ Ohne Gewaffen ein Gespenst." The logical composition of the poem in thesis, antithesis, and synthesis gives the poem substance and structure and ties in with the tradition of Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets.

Though the use of the dash increases compared to "Das finstere Meer," it is used thoughtfully and in places where it makes sense and could in most cases be replaced by a comma, for example: 'Du aber – mein König – vergassest mich!' (But you, my king, forgot about me!) In most cases the punctuation is used according to the rules of German grammar, which means that almost every sentence ends with either a full stop or an exclamation mark. "Irrender König" is a poem of structure, consistent stanzas, and canonic punctuation and can thus, especially if seen in contrast with "Klink- Hratzvenga," be called conventional.

The 'English' poem on this page in the *Little Review* does – in contrast to "Irrender König" - not even consist of recognizable English words. "Ildrich mitzdonja – astatootch" gives the reader with nothing to hold on to. A deeper meaning behind these mumblings cannot be found. In contrast to "Irrender König," Elsa fails to apply any rules of punctuation to this Dada poem. The dash is constantly used, often after every 'word,' for example: "Arr – Karr-/ Arrkarr – barr - / Karrarr – barr - / Arr - /" (4-7). Sometimes she uses the dash several times in a row, for example: "kniek - -"(12) or "niss - - -" (14). Her extensive use of the exclamation mark is also

noticeable, for example: “Mardoodaar ! ! !” (11) as well as the use of the French accent aigue on “Mar- dóórde – dar-“(10).

Even with limited English skills it is possible to write something with more meaning and structure than this sequence of letters. But this poem is purest Dada, following Tzara’s proclamation that “there is a great negative work of destruction to be accomplished” (Tzara 81). In “Klink- Hratzrenga” the Baroness is dismantling the English language. She destroys any remaining syntax structure, ignores any rules of punctuation, and takes apart words, so that they are unrecognizable. She did not do that with her German poems, which were unmistakably un-Dada. Scholars have identified her English Dada poetry as an assault on America (Gammel, Extravagance 70). In a 1923 letter, the Baroness herself states how she stands with America, “I hate this country – I am nauseated to see the monstrous faces – send me to Paris” (EvFL, letters, 1996 26).[iii] At this point in her life the Baroness is very eager to leave the American continent. She dislikes the Americans and feels, based on her distinction between low and high culture, racially superior to them. The Baroness believes that “high culture is only possible with emotional people, therefore the Americans will never have it and the Germans will” (EvFL, Art of Madness, *LR*, Jan. 1920 28-29). In the issue of the *Little Review*, with those very oppositional poems, “Irrender König” and “Klink- Hratzrenga,” the insult to the American culture must have seemed like a slap in the face of American readership.

While the Baroness aimed with her English “work of destruction” at a puritanical American readership, she saw no necessity to ‘destroy’ her German poems (Tzara 81). She could provoke the same American readership with the simple fact that the poems were written in German. The *Little Review* published the first pieces of art by the Baroness when the United States was still at war with Germany and thus drawing attention to the author’s foreignness, and

moreover its German identity, by switching languages or writing in another language, was very provocative (Gammel, German Extravagance 62). After the war the American public was influenced by the cold war and the fight against communism so that “by 1919 American popular media equated ‘foreign’ influences with dangerous communist infiltration” (Gammel, German Extravagance 66). The Baroness’ German heritage and the way she was propagandized in the *Little Review* have, in this political climate, often been interpreted as “anti-American” (Gammel, German Extravagance 66). This was provocation enough and thus there was no need for the Baroness to confront the American public with a destroyed content of a word when its recognizable *German* form hit the very mark of America’s cultural identity.

Still, the lack of necessity to ‘dadaize’ German language is not a fully satisfactory approach to the differences in her German poetry. Though the Baroness claims the high culture for the Germans (EvFL; Art of Madness, *LR*, Jan. 1920 28-29), and at times hates America she still did not clearly identify herself as German. In a letter to Djurna Barnes she writes: “I cannot stand the Germans, I cannot stand their language. I am a traitor here!” (EvFL, letters, *transition*, Feb 1928 20). Are her conventional poems then insulting the German language? Does she see it – very much according to the concept of Dada – as a dead language of a destroyed culture, with which one is not able to create something modern? Her last German poem “Walküren”, “Walkyries” in the *Little Review* can be read as a *yes* to these questions.

“Walküren” was published in the spring 1925 issue of the *Little Review,* Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven uses several metaphors of negativism and death in this poem, for example “Asch schlack grau –/ im Herzen/ dieser Dam” (Bed ash grey –/ in the heart/ of this lady)(11-13). Such images of ashes and the repeated use of the color grey as in the grey flame (“Flamm ist grau,”) (1), the metaphor of the “Knochenfrau” (bone woman) (8), as well as “Graniten,”

(Granites) (9) or the symbol of the "Grabbett" (deathbed) (4) speak a very clear language of death. With the picture of the flame that once was red and now is grey ("Flamm ist grau/ Einst war sie rot"), the Baroness uses the flame as a metaphor for life and progress. But the German language, like the flame, is dying. Once the language was red, full of life and energy, but now it is 'grey,' inanimate and not progressing any further. Also the Image of the dead walkyrie – a figure of northern Germanic myths speaks for itself "Sie / war/ tot" (She was dead) (19-21). The Baroness clearly mediates the picture of a dying Germanic symbol, which stands for more than mythology, but which stands for a dying Germanic/ German culture. But, as McKible states, not only Germany and its culture, but the entire, "European body, like its war-raved landscape, [is] 'devastated' (. . .) and 'trembling.'(. . .) It cannot save itself from its own insanity and death" (7). Modernism and progress was for the Baroness only connected to English and the American culture. In a letter to Djuna Barnes she writes how she can only progress in English, "I only move in English sounds. I am homesick for English language, my ear declines, my taste nauseated at German sounds" (EvFL, letters, *transition*, Feb. 1928 20), and that she considers herself American and not German, "*Save* me from Germany! (. . .) *They are dead*! ... I *am American*!" (EvFL, Autobiography, 1992 214)

All three German poems "Das finstere Meer," "Irrender König" and "Walküren" let the Baroness appear in a different light. The poems tell the reader that its author – known as "an avant-gardist notorious for her attacks on the traditional forms and content of art" (McKible 2) - was able to produce nice and decent poems with rhyme and meter, stanzas and metaphors. To those three German poems she does not exert her "idiosyncratic experimentations in poetry," (Gammel, German Extravagance 68) which involve linguistic inversion of the syntax as well as destruction of the actual words. Communication in English is for the Baroness equivalent with

provocation. Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven not only supported the *Little Review's* credo "Making no compromise with the public taste," (Gammel, German Extravagance 61) but she lived it. Her art, her performances, and her English poems "had an explosive political effect within a mass culture that promoted the sentimental, the puritanical, and the capitalist-useful (Gammel, German Extravagance 61). Readers of the *Little Review* questioned whether the magazine "had mistaken art for insanity" (McKible 8).

By no means, however, can communication in German be equated with adjusting to the masses. The fact that the poems were written in German was provocative enough at a time America had just absented itself from the First World War and was caught in anti-German suspicions. But to solve the puzzle of her German poetry's decentness, one has to consider whom the Baroness was aiming at. By writing a poem according to 'obsolete' principles, which for the Baroness meant everything that was not Dada, a poem with rhyme, meter, and consistent stanzas, she was not insulting the English language and through it American culture, but she was aiming at the very mark of German culture. The Baroness was struggling with her national identity. Born as a German, she felt she could not be German anymore, given her view that both Germany and its culture were dead, destroyed by the war that they allowed to happen. German language was no longer the language of progress and no modernist piece of writing could be created with it. The shock of World War I left her incapable and self-prohibited to apply any understanding of modernism, moreover Dadaism, to German language. Her insult to the German language and culture was even greater than any warlike assault her English "rhetoric of confrontation" could lead towards the American culture, as in contradiction to English, everything German was denied any ability for progress (Gammel, German Extravagance 70).

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[i] Anderson, Margaret quoted in: Robert, Reiss: "My Baroness. Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven" *Dada surrealism* 14 (1985): 81-101." 83.

[ii] Quoted in: Gammel, Irene: German Extravagance. 69.

[iii] Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven "Correspondence of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven with Margaret Anderson and Jean Heap." Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin, Unpublished transcript prepared by Kim Tanner, University of Prince Edward Island, 1996. Quoted in: Irene Gammel: "German Extravagance Confronts American Modernism: The Poetics of Baroness Else" *Pioneering North America, mediators of European Culture and literature.* (2000): 60-75. 70.