

introduction

“Say it with—— —

Bolts!

Oh thunder!

Serpentine aircurrents—— —

Hhhhhphsssssss! The very word penetrates!

—ELSA VON FREYTAG-LORINGHOVEN, “A DOZEN COCKTAILS—PLEASE”

The immense cowardice of advertised literati

& Elsa Cassandra, “the Baroness”

von Freytag etc. sd/several true things

in the old days/

driven nuts,

Well, of course, there was a certain strain

On the gal in them days in Manhattan

the principle of non-acquiescence

laid a burden.

—EZRA POUND, CANTO 95

THE FIRST AMERICAN DADA

The Baroness is the first American Dada. —JANE HEAP, 1920¹

“All America is nothing but impudent inflated rampantly guideless burgers—trades people—[...] as I say—: *I cannot fight a whole continent.*”² On April 18, 1923, after having excoriated American artists, citizens, and law enforcement for more than a decade, the German-born Dadaist Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (1874-1927) was leaving New York. Waving farewell from the Port Authority pier was magazine editor Jane Heap, who had steadfastly championed the Baroness’s poetry in the pages of *The Little Review*. The water churning beneath the *S.S. York* that was carrying the Baroness back to Germany was nothing compared to the violent turbulences she had whirled up during her thirteen-year sojourn in America.

No one had ever before seen a woman like the Baroness (figure I.1). In 1910, on arrival from Berlin, she was promptly arrested for promenading on Pittsburgh’s Fifth Avenue dressed in a man’s suit and smoking a cigarette, even garnering a headline in the *New York Times*: “She Wore Men’s Clothes,” it proclaimed aghast.³ Just as they were by her appearance, Americans were flabbergasted by the Baroness’s verse. Delirious in its ragged edges and atonal rhythms, the poetry echoes the noise of the metropolis itself. Profanity sounds loudly throughout her poems as she imagines a farting god; depicts sexless nuns gliding machine-like on wheels through city streets; and playfully deconstructs the names of her contemporaries, as Marcel Duchamp becomes “M’ars” (my arse) and William Carlos Williams is renamed “W.C.” (water closet). In her love poetry, the Baroness muses on the graphic details of ejaculation (figure I.2), orgasm, oral sex, anal sex, impotence, and contraceptives: “Madam—I firmly stand that ground/Coitus is paramount” (“Ah Me!”). In her candor, she contests the traditional libertinage of the early modernists who, she thought, desired “sex—with kitchenmaid” (“Hamlet of Wedding-Ring”), instead of with a mature and experienced woman artist. When her own formidable sexual appetite began to wane in middle age, the

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BARONESS V. FREYTAG-LORINGHOVEN



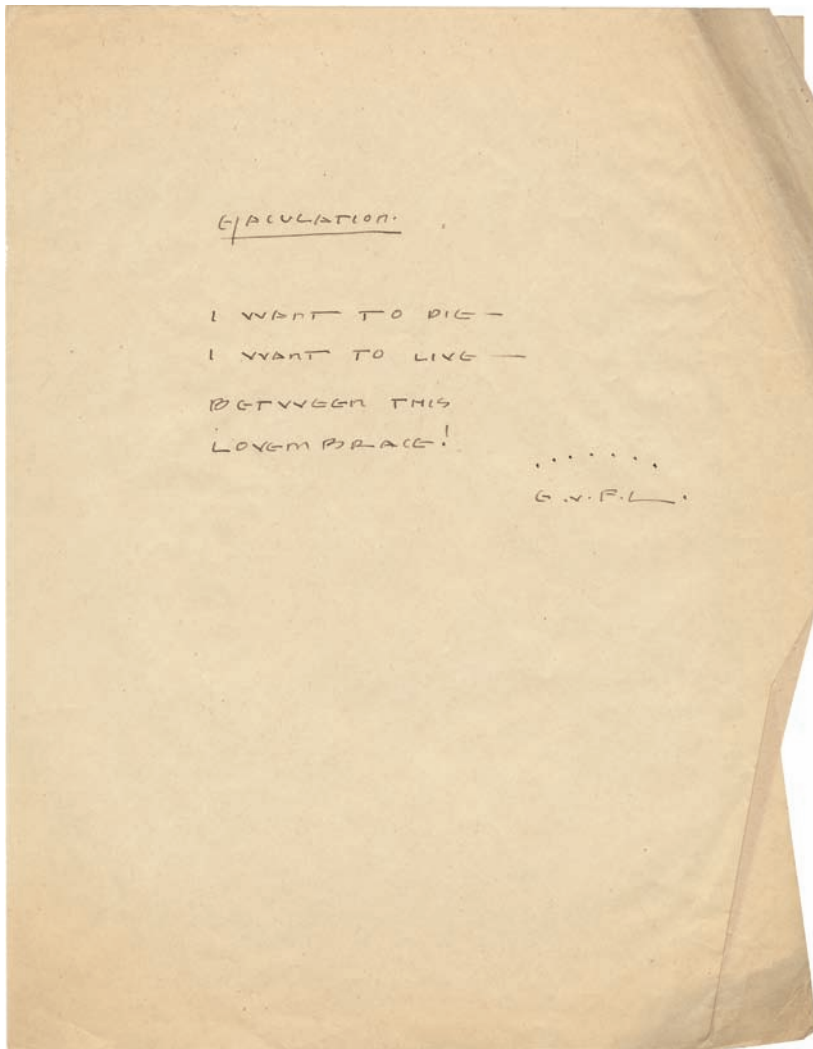


FIGURE I.1

George Grantham Bain. *Baroness v. Freytag-Loringhoven*. Photograph. George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

FIGURE I.2

Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, "Ejaculation," ca. 1924. Previously unpublished. Brown ink on paper. Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven Papers, University of Maryland Library.

Baroness proclaimed her new identity as “Valkyrie” to the world: “Wombbeing/Left/Me.”⁴

As a neurasthenic, kleptomaniac and man-chasing proto-punk poet, the Baroness was an agent provocateur within New York’s modernist revolution. Together with the writers associated with *Others* magazine, including Alfred Kreymborg, William C. Williams, Ezra Pound, Hart Crane, Mina Loy, Wallace Stevens, and Lola Ridge, she was part of the free verse movement causing a public uproar “as much by the sexual content of the ‘corsetless verse’ as by its formal improprieties,” as Suzanne Churchill notes.⁵ But the Baroness’s poetic enterprise, in advance even of the vanguard, involved more than taking off the proverbial corset—though she did that too by literalizing and performing the metaphor, infamously parading herself in the nude or in Dada couture of her own making. The Baroness’s poetic practice, which both electrified and alienated other poets, courted danger and scandal by raising an entirely new set of questions: What constitutes poetry? What are its aims? Where are its borders? Steeped in the arts and crafts movement in Munich and Berlin, the Baroness embraced a do-it-yourself aesthetic that would become central to the punk movement sixty years later.⁶ Her poems are both antihierarchical and instructional, showing readers how to “do it yourself”: How to practice poetry in the modern world? How to act out poetry? How to become poetry? How to turn poetry into sex? And, fundamentally, how to use poetry to extend modern identity?

In an era of cataclysmic change, when Dadaists in several world cities responded to the horrors of World War I and the changes in urban life, technology, and media culture, the Baroness embodied Dada in New York and actively lived *The Little Review*’s famous motto, “Making No Compromise with the Public Taste” (figure I.3). “When she is Dada she is the only one living anywhere who dresses Dada, loves Dada, lives Dada,” Heap observed.⁷ The New York Dada group, which congregated in the West Sixty-seventh Street studio of poet and collector Walter Arensberg and in the Greenwich Village offices of *The Little Review*, included Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray (with whom she collaborated), but also Francis Picabia, Arthur Cravan, and William Carlos Williams whose work the Baroness engaged in innovative and critical ways. Yet when New York Dada relocated to Paris, joining forces with Tristan Tzara, André Breton, and the Surrealists, the Baroness was left behind, unable to secure a visa for traveling to France.⁸ For her

FIGURE 1.3

Cover image with masthead "Making No Compromise with the Public Taste," *The Little Review: A Magazine of the Arts* (June 1917). Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.



career, it was a watershed moment, as she suddenly found herself separated from the community that had sustained her.

On board the S.S. *York*, en route to Germany, the forty-eight-year-old Dada veteran amused herself by shooting mock “Dada’ torpedoes” at the ship’s veteran captain, “that son of a gun,” whom she warned to stay away from “Art,” as she writes in her bilingual poem “Ach—lieber Kapitän—’/But—dear Captain—”: “Art’/That’s *my* ship!/ Skip!/ Flit!” Yet despite her playful tone and her glee at the captain’s baffled response, the Baroness was troubled, lamenting her “cataclysmic undertaking/To join ‘Fatherland.’” On the other side of the Atlantic lay an uncertain future in war-ravaged Europe. All her life’s work was contained in her three trunks stored in the ship’s hull: the creative output of a decade of poetry, performance, body ornaments, and sculptures packed pell-mell with her self-fashioned clothes that reeked of sweat and the city. How would she put this life’s work in order? As the Baroness writes presciently in her transatlantic and translinguistic poem, “Life’s start—end.” In the poem, she bridges the entire human life span with the elasticity of her dash, in marked contrast to the emphatic and final period following her use of the word *end*. In fact, her own end was only four years off.

BODY SWEATS: DADA POETRY FOR THE NEW CENTURY

A full century after the Baroness’s arrival in New York in 1910, *Body Sweats: The Uncensored Writings of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven* is the first anthology of poems and prose poetry by the controversial Dada artist. Sensuous and baffling, as daring and provocative as the Baroness herself, only 31 of the 150 poems and critical pieces in this anthology were published during her lifetime in avant-garde magazines such as *The Little Review*, *The Liberator*, *Broom*, *the transatlantic review*, and *transition*.⁹ Many remained unpublished not only because of their controversial form and content, but because the Baroness’s notoriety made many editors wary. Novelist, reporter, and illustrator Djuna Barnes (1892–1982) was the Baroness’s most consistent and loyal patron and friend, as well as her editor and literary agent. In fact, the two women collaborated on a collection of poems by the Baroness, who entrusted Barnes with editing it and securing a publisher. However, despite their concerted efforts during the mid-1920s, the project never came to fruition.

Perhaps the poems were meant to wait for their appreciative audience, confirming Marcel Duchamp's belief that the Baroness herself was "the future."¹⁰ With ice-cream-soda spoons as earrings and black lipstick, her flamboyant persona certainly evokes Björk, Nina Hagen, and Courtney Love. With tomato cans strung over her breasts, symbolizing the commodification of an exaggerated femininity, the Baroness also anticipates Madonna's infamous Jean Paul Gaultier-designed "cone bra."¹¹

It is time for readers of poetry to take stock of the ways the Baroness paved the road to much modernist and postmodernist experimentation, altering not only how poetry is written, but how it is read. The poems are firecrackers in plastic Petri dishes—explosive, dynamic, vibrant, but also devastatingly precise and revelatory as they lay bare distillations of human experience and struggle in an age of anxiety, war, increasing alienation, and debilitating gender, class, and racial inequity. Fiercely antibourgeois and antiestablishment in tone, like the punk music she prefigures, the Baroness's verse is loud and demands to be heard. Her poems are full not of sighs but of yells, loud in their articulations of the unutterable. Disdaining stylish polish, she proclaimed a new kind of beauty for the postwar era.

At the same time, the Baroness's poems are themselves art objects, as evidenced by the more than fifty manuscript reproductions included in this book, many of which are adorned with her sketches and diagrams. Moreover, images of Freytag-Loringhoven in performance are juxtaposed in *Body Sweats* with the relative fixity of her poems, demonstrating the ways in which language for her was an infinite collection of masks. The poet tried on words as she did her own ultramodern fashion designs, challenging the debilitating fiction of essential subjectivity and wholeness by slipping into and through different personas. The modern world, like the modern mind, was a fractured, evolving multiplicity. The poems document the nuances of the Baroness's sensual appreciation of language, the sharpness of her wit, and the depth of her integrative aesthetics. Her dancing body, ever present in these verbal collages, also takes us beyond the page.

The poems collected here concretize the pioneering spirit Freytag-Loringhoven injected into modernism. Although she alienated many of her contemporaries with her abrasive personality, she also had many admirers, as she inspired some of the most significant twentieth-century poets and artists, including Marcel

Duchamp, Djuna Barnes, Man Ray, and William Carlos Williams. Ezra Pound praised her for her “principle of non-acquiescence,” Claude McKay felt “titillated” by her “delirious verses” and “crazy personality,” and Kenneth Rexroth noted that her “verse represented a far more radical revolt against reality than [August] Stramm and Kurt Schwitters or Tristan Tzara.”¹² Her rebellious, highly sexed howls and countercultural Dada gestures made her a forerunner of the Beat poets of the 1950s, while her intensity, anger, and psychological complexity hailed the confessional poetry of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Like the Baroness, these poets harnessed their outrage at patriarchal entrapment into powerful assertions of their own subjectivities. But her trajectory also points to the poetic experiments of our own era, such as in the polygeneric performances of the Four Horsemen, or the found poems of conceptual artist and poet Kenneth Goldsmith.

“Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven has moved from the peripheries of New York Dada to occupy a central position,” asserts Richard Cavell.¹³ Currently the Baroness’s work is the focus of exhibitions, catalogues, performances, and scholarly studies, while her color poems, paintings, and sculptures are beginning to command a substantial price in the art market.¹⁴ Her experiments in Dada have inspired a biography, Irene Gammel’s *Baroness Elsa: Gender Dada and Everyday Modernity*; a novel, René Steinke’s *Holy Skirts*; Francis Naumann’s Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven Retrospective Exhibition in New York with iterations in Berlin and Zurich; Kerry Reid’s play *Last of the Red-Hot Dadas*; and also a fashion shoot with the late Hollywood actress Brittany Murphy performing the Baroness in Dior and Armani designs and punk accessories. In fact, the “explosion of studies of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven,” noted also by Michael White, comes as no surprise given how much the Baroness’s queered hybridity anticipates postmodern conceptual art and the feminist performance art of Marina Abramovic, Laurie Anderson, Sophie Calle, Yoko Ono, and Carolee Schneemann.¹⁵ In *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada*, art historian Amelia Jones has rewritten the history of the avant-garde by drawing attention to its psychological dimensions: by merging her own “neurasthenic” voice with that of the renegade Baroness Elsa, Jones breaks barriers of academic discourse.¹⁶

The Baroness inspires such transgressive gestures, yet ironically, the linguistic and artistic deviance of the Baroness’s

own words has remained buried in archives. Critics routinely note that her output was slim and that she is a difficult figure to recuperate, a point that we wish to counter with this collection. By finally creating access to the Baroness's uncensored words and giving readers the opportunity to appreciate the magnitude of her oeuvre for themselves, we hope to ignite creative and critical effervescence.¹⁷ How does one make a performance poem in the modern world? The Baroness leads the way, cruising the city with her senses attuned to the language of the body.

Let us consider a few examples of the Baroness's DIY poetics: her corporeal readymades.

HOW TO PERFORM THE CITY IN POETRY

*Wake up your passengers—/Large and small—to ride/
On pins—dirty erasers and/Knives (“Subjoyride”)*

In the poem “Subjoyride” (figure I.4) we embark on a high-energy walk through New York City, board a subway car at Broadway, and traverse a museum city of readymades and objects trouvés. “Subjoyride” exuberantly channels the city’s unceasing motion and energy, but also forces us to confront the underside of a burgeoning culture of consumerism. With objects, brand names, and landmarks colliding, the poem draws attention to its very construction. It references the external world and mirrors the way in which the modern metropolis assaults our senses with electric signs, with scents and sounds, and supersized advertisements:

Wrigley’s
Pinaud’s heels for the wise —
Nothing so Pepsodent — soothing —
Pussy Willow — kept clean
With Philadelphia Cream
Cheese.

The Baroness is an associative machine whose finely tuned sensors find poetry in everyday life: appropriating, borrowing, cataloguing, collaging, and parodying consumer products and advertisement slogans. Similar to Schwitters’ *MERZ*, a spoof on the pervasive dominance of *KOMMERZ* or commerce, so the Baroness’s “Subjoyride” presents a form of Dada “subvertising.” Brand names are powerful

SUBJOYRIDE V
 WAKE UP YOUR PASSENGERS -
 LARGE AND SMALL - TO RIDE
 ON PINS - DIRTY GRASERS AND
 KNIVES
 THESE 3 GRACES OPERATE SLOT
 FOR 5 CENTS.
 DON'T ENVY AUNT EMIMA'S
 SELF RAISING CRACKER JACK
 LAXATIVE KNITTED CHEMISE
 WITH THAT CHOCOLATY
 TASTE - ~~USE~~ USE ~~GREEN~~ ~~PICKLES~~
 PICKLES IN PATTERN
 FOLLOW GREEN LYONS.
 S.V.F.L.

FIGURE 1.4

Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, "Subjoyride,"
 p. v, ca. 1921. Black ink on paper. Previously
 unpublished. *The Little Review Records*,
 University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries.

precisely because they have the ability to change the cognitive structure of consumers, as Mark Batey notes in his book *Brand Meaning*, each encounter with a brand providing “a stimulus that is stored in the brain and adds to the associative network already existing for the brand.”¹⁸ The Baroness’s verse is fresh today because it lambasts the brand-centricity that shapes urbanite identities, a phenomenon more pervasive today than ever before.¹⁹ Blasting our blasé attitude, our blinkered, self-involved consumption, her verse achieves one of Dada’s central goals: to deautomatize (*deautomatisieren*) the reader by defamiliarizing the quotidian familiar; to “Wake up your passengers—/Large and small,” as she writes in the poem.

Thus, we also experience poetry itself anew. Not by normative means pretty, the poems depict a life lived in desperation and in courage, and so are startling in their beauty. Our consciousness is captured not only by the baffling simultaneity of heterogeneous materials but by the ongoing transformation of self.

HOW TO ENGINEER A CYBORG POEM

Wheels are growing on rosebushes (“Affectionate”)

Fusing, braiding, mixing, and crossing are at the heart of the Baroness’s poetry, in which portmanteau words blur the distinction between machine and body, nature and human, celestial and terrestrial world. Even the titles of her poems are mobilized by surreal hybridity: “Manquake,” “Harvestmoon,” “Filmballad,” and “Orgasmic Toast.” The city for the Baroness is a similarly blended space of “dancewind: herbstained/flowerstained,” as is the soul, contemplated by the poet as a “Magnetsoul” in “Atom.” As a wordsmith, the Baroness fused heavy metals in her peripatetic poetry, but her crucible also blended synthetic material (such as celluloid and rubber) with organic ones (such as vegetables and precious stones). The Baroness herself, accompanied by her dogs, whose bodies were festooned like her own, was “a lived transgression of the boundaries of human- animal- machine,” as Alex Goody writes in *Modernist Articulations*.²⁰ “By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short we are cyborgs,” writes Donna Haraway. Like Haraway’s cyborg, the Baroness is “wary of holism, but needy for connection” and aware that we live in a world in which “machines are disturbingly lively,

and we ourselves frighteningly inert.” Taking “*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries,” the Baroness reveled in breaking down the distinction between the sexes (powerfully asserting the artist as simultaneously male and female).²¹ Adorning her body with vegetables and technology, the Baroness was not afraid of partial identities or of transforming her own body in extraordinary ways, calling attention to the body as artistic canvas.

Consider her sculpture *Limbswish* (see figure 3.4), a whiplike device made of a curtain tassel that she wore as a hip belt, its title a poetic pun (*limbs wish/limb swish*), and its swishing sound creating bodily music as she walked. Several of her city poems, such as “Ostentatious,” incorporate *Limbswish* as a found object, the symbolism of which is deepened by the corporeality of this assemblage art object. Moreover, depictions of the “machinery” of the body abound in her poetry and poetic prose: “Why should I—proud engineer—be ashamed of my machinery—part of it?” she writes in the prose poem “The Modest Women.” In *Dadaphoto*, published in 1921 in the *New York Dada* magazine, and later retitled *Portmanteau*, the Baroness poses in the nude for Man Ray’s camera. A single black stocking leaves the impression of her right leg being cut off, reducing the body to the functionality of a coatrack. In this instance, the Baroness produces the prosthetic body as work of art, spoofing the pervasive dominance of modern technologies and consumer products.

In fact, the Baroness’s highly original portmanteau constructions are central to her poetic oeuvre. In words like *Phalluspistol*, *Noiseflickingswish*, and *Kissambushed*, themselves miniature poems, the poet simultaneously severs and links language, exploring the kinetic, processual, ongoing nature of life as experiential innovation. Similarly, the Baroness’s liberal use of the dash commands the arrangement of her lines and the shifting space of the page, ensuring that her poems, like her assemblage sculptures and self-made costumes, are safety-pinned or tightly wrapped in place for effect. Cutting up the poetic line with the kitchen knife of Dada, the Baroness’s dash liberates meaning:

Nudge it —
 Kick it —
 Prod it —
 Push it —

Broadcast——
 That's the lightning idea!
 ("A Dozen Cocktails—Please")

At the same time, the Baroness's dash symbolizes her extensive linking—her integrationist sensibility traversing multiple media. In part through her use of both the dash and the portmanteau, the Baroness's poems mirror her own body. They are sinewy and muscular—flexing against the page, against syntax, and against language itself, creating an embodied, performative poetics.

HOW TO BE A LIVE DADA POEM

*Stab for me/ Ruthless intensity/ Press to my bow'r —/
 My nook — my core! ("Dornröschen")*

The Baroness's performance sets her apart as a poet practitioner. Poetry is the A=C=T=I=O=N of performance. The Baroness did more than write words and traverse space on the page. Her poetry regularly leaps off the page to become a three-dimensional installation—a living, breathing Dada performance stunt that outdoes Marinetti and Ball. In the Lincoln Arcade on Broadway, in the studio of painter Louis Bouché, where she earned her livelihood posing nude, Bouché recalled her reciting a poem (no longer extant) whose refrain was, "Marcel, Marcel, I love you like Hell, Marcel," while giving her nude body a rubdown with a copy of *Nude Descending a Staircase*.²² "I have a strangely rough and powerful voice," the Baroness confirms, "and when I read with feeling my reading is very good—*excellent*—not like a stage performance."²³

Let's listen in on a scene that took place on a March day in 1922 in the Fourteenth Street office of the left-leaning *Liberator* magazine. The Baroness was visiting Claude McKay, the Jamaican American poet and executive coeditor (with Mike Gold) of the magazine. The visit is captured in an editorial by Gold: "*Ah, the Baroness Else Von Freytag-Loringhoven, with huge rings on her ten fingers, and her dog Sophie in her lap, is reciting her Dada poetry to Claude McKay in another room. The walls shake, the ceiling rocks, life is real and life is earnest! I see I will never get around to that review!*"²⁴ In the background is the street noise of "heavy motor trucks thunder[ing] by, horses jingl[ing] their harness . . . and a vegetable man . . . is shouting in a high falsetto."²⁵ We can almost hear the Baroness's voice colliding with the sounds of the city. As McKay

himself recalled another scene, the Baroness would declaim her poem “Dornröschen” in her “masculine and throaty” voice, “gaudily accoutred in rainbow raiment, festooned with barbaric beads and spangles and bangles, toting along her inevitable poodle in gilded harness.” McKay was so captivated that he published the poem in the January 1922 issue of the *Liberator*.²⁶

A remarkable photograph taken during spring 1922 by New York photographer George Grantham Bain shows Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and McKay (figure I.5). Although the photograph preserves some cultural norms (the Baroness looks up, McKay looks down), the composition speaks of subversion and border crossing: McKay wears a full dress and pearls; the Baroness wears a tribal headdress and bares her skin. The pairing of a sexually aggressive female poet from Germany with a leftist gay Jamaican poet does more than simply stage their pride in their own marginal status and queered identities. The coupling creates an extraordinary visual poem—with the Baroness’s legs forming a parallelogram with the staff held by McKay—the congruence symbolizing the sense of equality of the two diverse figures, almost like an enactment of the axiom: “If equals are added to equals, the wholes are equals.”²⁷ Despite the height differential, the Baroness appears cocky and assertive as she leans on McKay’s body, breaking the boundaries of his personal space. McKay seems like a slightly reluctant participant in this play of queered subjectivities, his feet standing safely on the ground, while the Baroness’s are poised for motion.

What is perhaps most striking about the Baroness’s poetics is the way in which she crossed cultural boundaries by composing “American” poetry as a German immigrant. From this position of estrangement, she slipped into the new linguistic

FIGURE I.5

George Grantham Bain. *Claude McKay and Baroness v. Freytag*. Photograph. George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



CLAUDE McTRAY BARONESS V. FREYTAG

idiom as if it were a costume, performing her poetry with the emphasis of her Germanic inflection. As Lesley Wheeler documents in her study *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present*, up until the modernist era (which witnessed stage and radio performances by African American poet Langston Hughes and Edna St. Vincent Millay), poetry and its performance were traditionally separate entities: the poet produced poetry for recitation by others in schools or domestic settings.²⁸ Just as Dadaist Hugo Ball crossed sociocultural boundaries in performing his poetry on the stage of the Cabaret Voltaire, wearing cubist costumes and using Marcel Janco's grotesque masks that gestured to traditional Romanian Jewish culture, so too did the Baroness perform across formal and aesthetic frameworks.²⁹ Unlike the stage-bound context of the Cabaret Voltaire Dada, however, the Baroness flung her performance into everyday life, intensifying the surprise effect for the audience and thereby enhancing the ephemeral, dramatic, and memorable impact that Peggy Phelan describes as characteristic of performance art.³⁰ Years later, the Baroness's audience would remember bits of her poetry, her voice, and her body. They would feel compelled to translate, transcribe, recycle, and replay it, having ingested her acts of transgression into their own consciousness and repertoire.

The Baroness's own body is the primary guide through her poetry. She used her body to challenge and perpetually recreate herself and modernist America, and her poems are written of and through her body. In fact, it was her attention to the ability of that body to tell a story, document its own expression, and perpetuate and interpret a language constantly in flux that lends her poems their electrical impulse.

SHOOOSHOOOT-WRUM: DADA SOUND AND SEX

Born as the trench warfare intensified, phonetic poetry was the language of trauma, a new language to counter the noise of the cannons and "to renounce the language that journalism has abused and corrupted."³¹ The Baroness, who was without the coterie of predecessors that her male colleagues enjoyed, was one of the very few women to practice sound poetry (Emmy Hennings performed her own songs on the stage of the Cabaret Voltaire, and the gender-bending Berlin poet Else Lasker-Schüler had written sound poetry

in 1902 that may have influenced the Baroness.)³² As they leap from the page to hiss in your ear, the Baroness's acoustic poems are simultaneously uncomfortable, arresting, and seductive.

Listen to her poem "To Home," dedicated to Jane Heap, who in 1923 spearheaded the Baroness's return home to Germany, the subject and occasion of the poem. Heap (see figure 6.2), who was quite a sight herself in her male suits, a male brush cut, and bright pink lipstick, was the object of the sexual undertones of the poem that signal the Baroness's queered heterosexuality. The poem gallops in the manner of the "Shaggy-merry-gray skin caviar pimply chevreaux," it describes. In a seductive riffing on Heap's initials, "jh" the editor is depicted both as riding the horse as "field admarmshmiralshall"—truly avant-garde in conquering the enemy lines of outdated modes of art through her work at *The Little Review*; at the same time, she is also being ridden, literally affording the Baroness's passage home and thereby stimulating and satisfying her desire. The "plup" of the hooves can also be heard as the pleading instructions of intimacy to "pull up": "Pl—p—up—/Plup lup—p—lup p—/Llllup—ee—ee ee—/Ee—ee—ee———."

The clapping animal sound gives way to the mechanic roar of a ship's engine, the means by which the Baroness would travel, reinforced by the "Sllllush" and "Swish" of waves as they break against the boat's hull. Readers can imagine the heightened effect of the Baroness's lines as they comingle with her Germanic pronunciation:

Hoooo—hoot—hoot —/ Jooheeee—frrrrljeeee—/ Pee—
peep—shoooo hoot
Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!/ Wrum —/ Wwrrrrumm —/ Pumm —
Swish—sh—sh—sh —sh—
Sish —/ Sish —/ Sh—sh—sh—sh —/ S—s—s—s—r—r—
r—r —/ Suuuuuuu —/ Suuuuuuu/ Suu—suu—suu—s—s—
s—s—s —/ Sushpl —
Pl—pl—— up —/ Plup lup—p—lup p —
Llllup—ee—ee ee —/ Ee—ee—ee———

Heap, like the Baroness's "limbswish" also suggested here, is a penetrative phallic symbol—the bellowing blow of a ship's horn in its echoing "hoot-hoot." Her initials progressively merge with the clapping hooves, and the poem's concluding assertion of ecstasy, the final "Ee—ee—ee—." A comparison can be made

between the Baroness's use here of the "found" letters of Heap's initials in the composition of her poem and one of the most famous sound poems of the era, Kurt Schwitters's *Ursonate* (1922-1932), itself based on "found" letters from popular advertisements. This praxis is the literary analogue to the use of garbage and other found material so central to the visual collage work of both artists. Through her dispersive use of sound here and throughout the rest of the collection, the Baroness conveys the fluidity of femininity as a constantly changing, polysemous signifier. At the same time, she conveys something of the sensuous "noise of language" and the jouissance of linguistic play.³³

Fierce and boisterous and alive, the Baroness's poems also capture and crystallize the subtleties of everyday interaction. Consider, for example, the elusiveness of human connection even among lovers in the poem "To Whom It May Concern." The distilled emotion of the poem captures the fleeting moment of genuine visibility and appreciation—the instantaneous comprehension of all that is conveyed in the subtle toss of a lover's head:

Clean
Whip of
Hair —
Queu swish of
Racing mare —
Love's spontaneous
Gesture.

The anonymity of the poem's title conveys the fundamental solitude of human existence, the inherent impermanence of coinciding with another consciousness. Alluding again to her sculpture *Limbswish*, the Baroness displays an acute sensitivity of perception. She apprehends skin, texture, flesh, the weight of hair in wind, or of furniture tassel, and the chance of loss that comes with every win implied in "Racing mare."

Boldly erotic, the Baroness's poems offer poignant commentary on the cultural consumption and valuation of the female body and what insights that might lend to an understanding of the economy of art. Thus, it is in poems like "A Dozen Cocktails—Please," that she, as a woman, rivals and arguably outperforms the shocking bodily exuberance of male Dadaists such as poet-boxer Arthur Cravan, whose own writing was predicated on his belief that

“genius is nothing more than an extraordinary manifestation of the body” and who, Roger Conover writes, “loved the taste and smell of the body’s first issues—urine, shit, spit, sweat—and regarded these fundamental utterances as prototexts.”³⁴ Similarly, the Baroness’s poem not only asserts the power of female sexual appetite; it luxuriates in its exhibitionism. These are not discreet, oblique glimpses into intimate moments, but proud and candid articulations of fellatio, vibrators, and masturbation: “No spinsterlollypop for me —yes—we have/No bananas—I got lusting palate—I/Always eat them —————” (“A Dozen Cocktails—Please”). To demonstrate her appetites is to make herself present, to take up space in a sociocultural landscape that privileged male subjectivity and objectified women. By inhabiting her own exhibitionism, the Baroness reclaims the female body in language, but also transforms that body through a new language of desire.

“LOOK FULL OF LAUGHTER”: DADA CARNIVAL

The poems in this collection are unabashedly humorous in their ribald, bawdy, mocking tone—a striking feature in a literary age dominated by veiled satire and a much more connotative humor, as in the poems of Mina Loy or the lesbian eroticism of Gertrude Stein. Like Stein’s work, the Baroness’s poems are also playful. Scatological references abound, as in her poem “Kindly” (see figure 2.5), inspired by James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and in which she toys with an overly proper, humorless audience:

And God spoke kindly to mine heart —
 So kindly spoke He to mine heart —
 He said: “Thou art allowed to fart!”
 So kindly spoke He to mine heart.

In her introduction to the Bad Girls exhibit of radical feminist artists at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in 1994, Marcia Tucker identifies the subversive power of the female joke, which “challenges traditional role models, defies stereotypes, is seductive, inclusive and, most important, is based on the idea that any and all systems of exploitation, not just those that exploit women, can and must be changed for the better.”³⁵ Through her humor, the Baroness could own her cultural criticism. She is, after

all, often laughing at herself. Naumann confirms that for New York Dada, “humor is the most salient, consistent, and powerful operating factor behind the creation of all great Dada artifacts.”³⁶ Dada soirées were typically characterized “by the paradoxical logic of reversal, by parodies and travesties, profanations, derogations, and dethronings,” as Tom Sandqvist writes in *Dada East*, observing that Zurich Dada had turned into an art the craziness of laughter, the farce of nothingness and the absurd.³⁷

Humor also enables the Baroness to diffuse her pain, as she did in 1921, for example, when, in response to a number of failed love affairs, including relationships with Marcel Duchamp and William Carlos Williams, she created two works of art. The first was a poem she sent for consideration to *The Little Review*, entitled “Graveyard Surrounding Nunnery” (see figure 7.4), on which she drew an entanglement of male genitalia symbolically laid to rest behind tombstones. She begins, “When I was/ Young—Foolish—/I loved Marcel Dushit.” Her characteristic use of the dash here takes on the symbolic function of castration, cutting her lines short as she cuts down the men she mocks, who, in their implied failure to please her, force her to choose the abstinence of the nunnery. Another response to her romantic frustration was created on her own person: she shaved her head and shellacked it vermillion red—and this she flaunted in the streets of New York. Desexing may be inherent in the Baroness’s gesture, “like the nun who cuts off her hair on entering the convent.”³⁸ And yet, through figuratively decapitating/ castrating the masculine head in her poem, the Baroness emphasizes and gives expression to her own head—one that is erect and depicts the vermillion, vibrant flow of potency, making herself a phallic erection. In this gesture, the Baroness is armed with her own sword, brandishing her erotized ability to please herself: “Shaving one’s head is like having a new love experience,” she explained.³⁹ The humor and sense of play the Baroness enjoyed in the poetics of her body was mobilized in her original use of language, creating words that were startlingly exacting in their surrealist juxtaposition and deeply funny as well. Where the Baroness isn’t screaming, she is laughing, reveling in glorious subversion.

I HATE, HATE: EXCITABLE SPEECH

As a complex, pugnacious devotee to art for its own sake, the Baroness certainly contained multitudes—some of them refreshing, daring, liberating, and deeply passionate and some disturbing and unpalatable. The Baroness had Jewish lovers and collaborated with Jewish artists (including Man Ray), yet she also trumpeted some of the racial stereotypes of her era, revealing anti-Semitic preconceptions (such as commenting on the large penis size of one of her Jewish lovers as “this oriental trait”).⁴⁰ As her editors, we do not wish to sanitize the Baroness’s oeuvre, thereby restricting our readers’ access to the complexity of her capacious mind, even if we risk alienating some of those readers by what one of her early champions, Dickran Tashjian, calls “hysterical cant, mixed with savagely ad hominem arguments which appear harsh and wide of the mark.”⁴¹ Rather, we wish to situate the Baroness’s ethnoracial utterances in the context of the geopolitical anxieties on both the national and international stage during the first half of the twentieth century, and more specifically in the context of a literary modernism that perpetually invoked, challenged, and perpetuated “the Jewish question.”

In his essay “Neither Excuse nor Accuse: T. S. Eliot’s Semitic Discourse,” Bryan Cheyette writes: “I prefer ‘semitic discourse’—as opposed to ‘anti-Semitism’ or ‘philo-Semitism’—because this phrase has the advantage of eschewing the inherent moralizing in deciding who is, or is not, ‘anti-’ or ‘philo-.’” As Cheyette points out, “The danger is that the conventional historiography continues to essentialize Jews as uniquely timeless, unchanging victims and therefore positions the history of anti-Semitism outside of the social, political, and cultural processes which gave rise to this history in the first place.”⁴² This approach has the advantage of opening up new paths of thinking about racial discourse. As such, our aim in showcasing inflammatory work by the Baroness is to tease out the cultural and personal intricacies of a still underrecognized modernist artist. The Baroness’s oeuvre vacillates between disparaging remarks and passages that celebrate the same characteristics she attributes to and dismisses in the Jewish population. The trope of the “wandering Jew” for example, is employed by the Baroness as an aspersion, and yet her own attempts and desire to deracinate herself, plunging into new cultures as a marginalized, poverty-stricken, androgynous, little understood

female artist, and German immigrant of Polish descent, made her a perpetual “wanderer” herself. Jonathan Freedman also traces a “consistent pattern of response with respect to the figure of the Jew” throughout the work of American modernists, including Edith Wharton, Henry James, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. His essay makes clear the “charged political and social atmosphere of London, Paris, and New York” from which some many avant-gardists and modernists emerged.⁴³ While Freedman’s analysis underscores the tension between Jews and gentiles within the cultural arbitration of academia and intellectual exchange, it also suggests the general artistic climate in which the Baroness both made her art and to which her art responded.

Additionally, it is important to consider the Baroness’s Semitic discourse within the framework of a larger, purposefully argumentative and resistant language that sought, by whatever provocative means, to challenge, blast, and overthrow fixed notions of all kinds. As Adam McKible notes, “In poem after poem, Freytag-Loringhoven pushed every button she could.”⁴⁴ “Thee I call ‘Hamlet of Wedding-Ring’” is, on the one hand, a vitriolic outburst of a woman scorned by a lover, but it is also a perceptive early reading of William C. Williams in a style that is Dada in its efforts to provoke. The Semitic discourse in the piece, from the perspective of a rejected lover, highlights a central paradox of a number of modernist literary encounters with the Jewish figure: the progressive democracy of intended racial integration (having Jewish friends, lovers, collaborators, and patrons) and the reactionary rhetoric of ethnoracial determinism, as when she charges Williams with being hampered by “Jewish” family sentiment.⁴⁵ Like her collage style, the Baroness exalted in jagged edges created through violent but productive dislocation, and her passages of shockingly racist language certainly do butt up against her many generative and integrationist ones. The Baroness’s racially essentialized and derogatory discourse is anathema to the many crossings, intersections and celebrations of genre and gender blurring so central to her aesthetic practice, a drive that should make readers consider carefully the contradictions involved in the more objectionable segments of her work.

It is important to note that the Baroness expressed the same virulent rhetoric against her own culture and religion, and her Dada dismissal of the holiest symbols of Christianity (“Hope is madness of idealist. Christ died on the cross for it and babbled

of hope! Shit on the cross!") is likely to offend Christian readers, as is the poem "Spiritual Pass," in which Jesus is portrayed as "Mr. Ditched—Hitched Saint," the "Hitched" blasphemously referring to the crucifixion.⁴⁶ Moreover, living in Berlin, Freytag-Loringhoven excoriated her own culture (referred to as "Teutonic") as locked in the past in a 1924 letter to Djuna Barnes: "I—in Germany! The people here have turned poisoned vermins—for constitutional inferiority. Yes. They are dull mean clumsy blockheads!"⁴⁷ Thus, the Baroness's excitable speech also ought to be considered within Dada's militant arsenal: its rhetoric of animosity and cultivation of gestures of belligerence and grandiosity; its salvos of disgust and toilet room ecstasies are likewise found in Francis Picabia, Raoul Hausmann, and others. In a war-ravaged world, the trauma caused by the war's destruction could be met only with counteraggression, raising questions about the limits of Dada itself.

Ironically, it was in Berlin that the Baroness, supported by several American women including Djuna Barnes, Berenice Abbott, Sarah Freedman, and Peggy Guggenheim, embraced her "American" identity, reading American classics, composing poetry in, as well as translating German poetry into, American English. "I do not any more 'hate' America! I kneel before it—I love it—it is right. It bears future! It is my country! I even love Greenwich Village with all it[s] sill[i]ness."⁴⁸ It was in Berlin that she proceeded to tell the story of her own development as a woman, artist, and poet in letters and in her autobiography, as well as in poetry, addressing primarily an American audience.

HOW TO BECOME A DADA POET

"My first poem I made at the age of twelve—when I began to retire for this purpose into the convenient crotch of a big walnuttree—for the sake of loftiness and seclusion," the Baroness recalls in her autobiography.⁴⁹ When her mother, Ida-Marie Plötz, was becoming mentally unstable, she would commandeer her children as an audience to recite the verses of her beloved poets. Plötz would later appear in the Baroness's poetry, in such poems as "Marie Ida Sequence," "Thistledownflight," and "Flameashes." The Baroness's father, Adolf Plötz, "a sovereign, entirely uncultured malebrute," as she called him in her autobiography, was a tyrant who abused his wife and children.⁵⁰ Her ambivalent feelings about him are explored

ADOLESCENCE.

IN MEMORIAM

GLINT COAST
TAUT SEA
WE DROVE
DULL BY -
DUN CLOUDS
FESTOONED
UDDERS
FROM SKY -
DRAB WAVES
UNFURLED -
REVOLVING
DAZED -
RETRACED.

SURFCHURN
UPON
KELPS RUDDY
RIDGE -
RESEMBLED
LACE
PUCKERD
BY STICH -
SHELLS CHALK
SHIRRED VALANCE
BRIMMED MORE
PALE -
THAN HAIL.

HARK THEE:
WHY NOT
AS YOU
AT DART -
DEST

~~FATHER~~
~~PATER~~

FANT WEIRD
AWAIL
OFF LATS
PAW SEA -
YULLS MOCK
SIRREN
SHIVERD
EERY -
AMONK
SHE CLEAVED
QUICKSILVER
PIT -
ALIT.

ABRUPT
~~AMONK~~
KEEN PANG
THROUGH SQUAL
LID GRAY -
BESEECHD
ASCENT
HITHER!
AWAY
AUDACIOUS
SQUAWK
BEAK SPIN
ORIFT
WIPEO -
BAGPIPED.

EVER -
SWEET HEART? ²
~~ANY QUALITY~~ -
^{PINGOT.}
TACIT ENEMY

~~ANY~~
KNEE
TO KNEE ^{he} G.V.F.L.

in “Adolescence” (figure I.6), a poem in which he is characterized as the “enemy,” and in “Ancestry,” in which she lambasts his (and her own) sexual promiscuity (“Damn his prick—/I’ve got that turn in me!”). When her mother died of uterine cancer, the young Else held her father responsible, charging that her mother’s death was due to untreated syphilis, contracted as a result of her husband’s promiscuity.

Thus the fiercely antibourgeois Baroness was the product of a small-town home. Else Plötz was born by the Baltic Sea in Swinemünde (today Świnoujście in Poland) but chafed under the bourgeois harness of Wilhelmine provincialism, respectability, and hypocrisy. Hungry for experience, Else despised academic learning, dropping out of the *Kunstschule* in Berlin at age sixteen. By the time she had turned twenty years old, she had flung the rules of respectability to the wind: “every night another man,” as the Baroness recalls her rebellious younger self in her autobiography, “I was intoxicated.”⁵¹

In Berlin and Munich she absorbed the influences of expressionism. Interested more in life and sex than in visiting museums and studying art, Else became a muse for the German neo-Romantic avant-garde in Berlin and Munich—her sexual unconventionality and androgyny sparking novels, novellas, and paintings. She earned her money as a model for erotic sculptures and as an actress, just as later she would earn her income as a model for painters. Her sexual quests included three marriages and bigamy. At age twenty-seven, she married Berlin architect August Endell, a brilliant artist and intellectual whose sexual impotence provided fodder for poetry and bolstered her claim for women’s “sexrights.” With her penchant for sexual triangulation, she started

FIGURE I.6

Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven,
 “Adolescence,” ca. 1923. Green and red ink
 on paper. Previously unpublished.
 Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven Papers,
 University of Maryland Library.

an affair with his best friend, the writer and translator Felix Paul Greve, whom she married in 1907, after an acrimonious divorce from Endell. She dedicated numerous love poems to Felix, whom she considered the love of her life, but it was his jealous suppression of her independence and creativity that would eventually fuel her impassioned rebellion in poetry.

The Baroness composed poetry at several important intervals: while longing for Felix Paul Greve in the sanatorium in Wyk auf Föhr in 1902 (she was having her womb massaged in a state-of-the-art health spa to alleviate her sexual problems with her husband), and while living in Italy, in 1903-1904, after she experienced orgasm for the first time at the age of almost thirty.⁵² A series of poetic portraits were published in 1904-1905 in the German literary magazine *Die Freistatt* under the name Fanny Essler, a joint pseudonym for “Else” and “Felix.”⁵³ When the couple plotted their escape to North America and when she arrived in New York in 1910, she identified herself as a writer. As their marriage disintegrated, Greve’s cold desertion in Kentucky prompted a more sustained effort of writing poetry fueled by grief and anger. Although she first had to learn English, it was New York that gave birth to her identity as professional poet. There she began composing her first English poems, as well as translating her earlier German poetry. In 1913 in Manhattan, without divorcing Greve, she married the Baron Leopold von Freytag-Loringhoven, a man without depth but a “sportsman” in love, as she describes him, who also bestowed the Baroness’s colorful title. By 1918 the Baroness wrote and painted all day and night. She had finally found her vocation in poetry and art as her own formidable sex drive was waning.

That year she made her first appearance in the offices of *The Little Review*, as Margaret Anderson recalls:

On her head was a black velvet tam o’shanter with a feather and several spoons—long ice-cream-soda spoons. She had enormous earrings of tarnished silver and on her hands were many rings, on the little finger high peasant buttons filled with shot. Her hair was the color of a bay horse.

Finally she bestowed her attention upon Jane [Heap].
I have sent you a poem, she trumpeted.⁵⁴

It was the beginning of an eventful five years during which the Baroness’s poetry was printed alongside James Joyce’s *Ulysses*,

which was serialized in the magazine starting in March 1918, the synergy of provocations creating a firestorm of controversy (see appendix B). In fact, among the likes of Joyce, Yeats, Ben Hecht, Mina Loy, Hart Crane, Ezra Pound, Maxwell Bodenheim, and others, the Baroness was the most frequently printed poet in *The Little Review*.⁵⁵ More than any other Dadaist in New York, the Baroness fanned the flames in the fight against censorship and puritanical prejudice. It was the September 1919 issue that gained her notoriety, opening as it did with her provocative poem “Mineself—Minesoul—And—Mine—Cast-Iron Lover.” The poem is a brazen expression of female desire, explosive and aggressive in both form and content, its capitalized letters seeming to shout at readers. The Baroness’s provocations came to represent Dada in New York.

And yet following the difficulties they faced during the *Ulysses* obscenity trial, the Baroness’s primary editors, Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, were forced to impose certain artistic restrictions in the pages of *The Little Review*, sidelining the potential publication of a number of contributions, including some poems belonging to the Baroness, whose very name aroused the suspicion of sponsors.⁵⁶ “Subjoyride,” “Graveyard Surrounding Nunnery,” “Fastidious,” “Lofty Logic,” “Bereft,” “Desirous (Love Prayer),” “Teke Heart,” and many more poems in English and German, including some decorated in color, remained unpublished in the drawers of *The Little Review* office. “You seem to ignore my queries—etc.!” she charged in a letter: “I only didn’t know you were ninnyasses.”⁵⁷ In another letter (figure I.7), the Baroness excoriated Margaret Anderson: “I *dare* say—*M.A.* if this where signed ‘William Cheakespeare—’ you *would*./ ‘Like it!’/ <Maybe not!>/!!!!!!” When the Baroness found the doors of *The Little Review* office locked, as Anderson recalls, “she strew tin cans down the stairs, hurling terrible and guttural curses over her shoulder for three flights.”⁵⁸

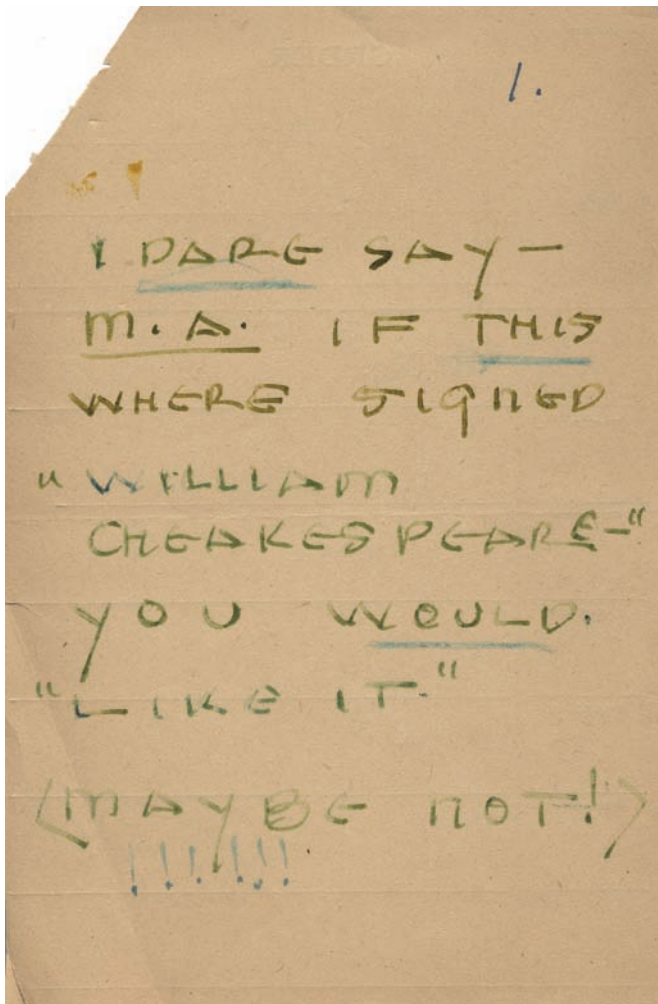
And thus ended the New York period—what she considered the summit of her artistic production. In 1923, when she returned to Berlin, the capital of a defeated Germany, the Baroness intensified her efforts to publish her book of poetry with the help of Djuna Barnes (figure I.8). Her letters to Barnes are testimony to her remarkable output as she tried to ready her poetic legacy for publication by an American publisher. In Berlin, the Baroness composed poetry in English, even translating some of her earlier German work. One letter written to Barnes sometime between

FIGURE 1.7

Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven to Margaret Anderson, "I Dare Say—," ca. 1921-1922. Green and blue ink on paper. Previously unpublished. *The Little Review* Records, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries.

FIGURE 1.8

Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Djuna Barnes, 1926. Djuna Barnes Papers, University of Maryland Library.





1923 and 1925 yields important insight into her method, as she comments on a long German poem by saying,

30

Is a thing of long ago I freshened up—it became surprisingly fine—that’s all I do now—any way—by memory! Or translate my own things—from German into English—and the other way.

Send all these things to “*The Little Review*” maybe they’ll buy them—for pity’s sake what?

This “freshening” technique is central to a number of poems, as she was pulling together her life’s work, collecting poetry she had first written in Wyk auf Föhr, Palermo, and New York, and updating earlier poetry for publication. Meanwhile, her style was becoming increasingly minimalist, as she stripped her poetry of its syntax, arranging it in word columns as lean as her own body, opening up space and celebrating a new “chemistry in words.”

In fact, the Baroness’s editorial process consisted of repeatedly paring down her lines until they became word lists, such as in her poems “Query,” “Extant,” “Sunsong,” and “History Dim.” Gaby Divay discusses what she calls the Baroness’s “reductionist method” wherein the “purged versions” become “bare columns of nouns, adjectives, and the occasional verb of strikingly expressive power.”⁵⁹ Such a rigorous removal of connective language was purposefully Dada. The Baroness’s word columns do not fix meaning within the context of a given line, but leave words open to their polysemous nature and the multiple associations they yield. Many of the unpublished poems included here were readied during this crucial period, when Freytag-Loringhoven lived in postwar Berlin in abject poverty, warding off depression, panic attacks, and the haunting specter of suicide. She checked herself into a mental institution, where she began writing her autobiography, prompted by Barnes, who thought it should accompany the collection of poetry, no doubt trying to highlight the embodied nature of the Baroness’s verse. But like everything else in the Baroness’s life, the autobiography took on a life of its own, becoming a separate book (published posthumously in 1992 as *Baroness Elsa* by editors Paul Hjartarson and Douglas Spettigue). Meanwhile the Baroness, who had little contact with the Berlin Dadaists, set her sights on Paris, the city to which many of her American friends had migrated. Already she

had set up the context for her arrival by placing three poems in Ford Madox Ford's Paris-based journal, *the transatlantic review*.

The final stage of her life in Paris, from 1926 to 1927, was as dramatic as it was short. She wrote and revised many poems including "Café du Dôme," "Ancestry," "A Dozen Cocktails—Please," and "Stagnation," but also tried to launch a modeling agency to support herself financially, announcing her new venture in an advertisement presented in the form of a visual poem (figure I.9). She became close friends with Jan Slivinsky, the owner of Au Sacre du Printemps, at 5 rue du Cherche-Midi, who held regular literary performances at his gallery and exhibited work by photographer Berenice Abbott and model Kiki de Montparnasse (figure I.10).⁶⁰ Here in Paris studios and cafés, she met friends (and foes) who sparked poems or to whom she dedicated poems, including the surrealist book binder Mary Reynolds (Duchamp's lover), Abbott, Barnes, and the musician George Antheil.

COSMIC SENSE: SUICIDE

The Baroness's ultimate demise was shockingly sudden, though not unexpected. She had a family history of suicide and suicide attempts: her grandfather had shot himself, her mother tried to drown herself, her second husband had faked a suicide, and her third husband shot himself in the head in 1919. In numerous letters the Baroness had contemplated suicide: "is—suicide—hence—my natural conclusion—or—insanity—? Which is identical—only: one waited too long—the first is more decent."⁶¹ Yet she seemed to have escaped the impulse, as she writes to Guggenheim just a few months before her death: "Sure—suicide is but simple witted relative effectively shrouded for practical joke—but—but—but—all but I conjure up against that spectral pageant!"⁶²

In "Cosmic Sense Suicide," a poem that may be read as an eerie foreshadowing and rationalization of her own ambiguous death, the Baroness anticipates a controversial argument employed by contemporary supporters of euthanasia. She reasons: "No death—existence—deed—undeid—ever *is* /'Untimely—unnatural'./All *action*/ Within law—or it were not." The poem is also prescient of the numerous suicides among her contemporaries. Harry Crosby's jarring suicide pact with his mistress in 1929 would leave a devastating lacuna in modernist and avant-garde publishing. Arthur

ARE YOU ASLEEP WITH SOMNOLENT MODELS ?

WAKE UP

IN CREATIVE CROQUIS

" THE BARONESS "

FAMOUS MODEL FROM NEW YORK
PUTS

ART INTO POSING

CRAFTSMANSHIP

COME TO THE

BARONESS CROQUIS

SEE

BODY EXPRESSION

SPIRIT PLASTIC

BEGINNING

FROM 1-3 1/2 H POSES
5-7 o'clock 5 MIN

7 IMPASSE DU ROUET

AVENUE CHATILLON (METRO ALESIA)

FIGURE I.9

Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, *Advertisement for Modeling School*, 1927. Flyer. Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven Papers, University of Maryland Library.

FIGURE I.10

André Kertész, *Jan Slivinsky and Friends at Au Sacre du Printemps*, Paris, 1927. Gelatin silver print. 7.9 × 11 cm. Previously unpublished photograph. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



Cravan, Jacques Rigaut, Julien Torma, and Jacques Vaché sparked an anthology entitled *4 Dada Suicides*, while surrealist Ghérasim Luca's *La Mort Morte* contains five fictional suicide accounts with notes (although the death-haunted poet did not commit suicide by jumping into the Seine until age eighty in 1994). Dadaist Hans Richter draws an explicit connection between Dada and suicide when he writes: "One tendency in Dada taken to its extreme [is] final nothingness, suicide."⁶³

For most people, suicide is a dramatic and desperate choice, often contemplated and planned over months and even years. For male Dadaists, the methods ranged from the violently bizarre to the mysterious. According to the Baroness, suicide had to be carefully arranged (perhaps like a work of art?), as she had written to Djuna Barnes a few years earlier: "But—even for suicide—one has to arrange—*go up*—to lie down forever—*here!*"⁶⁴ During the cold winter of 1927, the Baroness bought a small ancient gas stove. A friend had warned her against it, but Elsa (as she would become known) insisted on the purchase because she thought that "it looked like a coffee pot."⁶⁵ On the night of December 14, she lay down in her bed with her dog, Pinky. The gas was left on, and that night, the Baroness died as she had lived: in the company of her dog and a room full of quotidian objects. Was this everyday "coffee pot" her final readymade in the poem of her life on the margins? Some of her friends rumored that it was a Dada joke. No note was found, but her suicidal letters, documenting her despair, her own impulsive behavior, the cold winter, the anxiety about deportation (having to work illegally to support herself), and her family history of suicide all conspire to suggest that her death was likely intentional. The Baroness's fate was the logical consequence of her abject poverty, itself the result of having chosen the life of uncompromising, impecunious avant-garde art. The gas stove cum coffee pot as instrument of death was certainly bizarre, but the ambiguity of the final act—accident/suicide—mirrors the blurring of boundaries that were a consistent part of her life and art.

The burial took place in January 1927, not in the Père Lachaise Cemetery of the artists, as formerly believed, but in Mont Joli Cemetery, as recalled by Barnes. Laid to rest in a third-grade pine coffin befitting the impoverished conditions of her life, the Baroness had died the unsung death of the vanguard's foot soldier dying far from home. The letters and poetry she left behind give voice to the loneliness and mental pain that was the *condition humaine*

of the postwar era for which she is an apt icon. Her collection of poetry, having remained unfinished, contains a sense not only of a life cut short, but of a promise left unfulfilled. Nor did Barnes ever finish the biography of the Baroness that she had planned and started, although a decade later, she would incorporate the Baroness centrally into her carnivalesque masterpiece *Nightwood* (1936). The funeral ceremony at Mont Joli was attended by a handful of friends, including Barnes, Thelma Wood, and the abortionist Doctor Dan Mahoney (the group would figure as Nora Flood, Robin Vote, and Dr. Matthew O'Connor in *Nightwood*). Because the party was late, gallery owner Jan Slivinsky was the only one who saw the casket descend.⁶⁶ American author Allan Ross MacDougall, a close friend of Isadora Duncan, who herself had just died in a bizarre car accident, sent flowers in his absence. In 1928, the editors of *transition*, Eugene and Maria Jolas, published Barnes's moving but oblique obituary (appendix B) along with excerpts of the Baroness's suicidal letters (heavily edited by Barnes) and the photograph of her death mask a month later in the February issue (see figure 8.1).

For the rest of her life, Barnes, the recipient of the Baroness's suicidal letters, was haunted by her friend's words about "my *Book of Poetry*. . . Oh! What may be—it would *do* for me to keep me—at least—*floating*—if I could see it *soon!* Djuna—it is *desperately* necessary for me—."⁶⁷ Ezra Pound deplored that the Baroness's poetry had been excluded from Geoffrey Moore's *The Penguin Book of Modern American Verse* ("his damPenNGuin"), as he noted in his 1954 letter to Margaret Anderson: "yu wd/ be proper person to chew his ear for oooomission of Elsa vF. L."⁶⁸ In 1957, Djuna Barnes asked Marcel Duchamp for help in placing the Baroness's manuscripts at the Yale University Library, but it was not until 1973 that her poetry was eventually deposited to the University of Maryland Library at College Park, along with Barnes's own manuscripts.⁶⁹ The Baroness's poems and letters to *The Little Review* went to the University of Wisconsin, along with *The Little Review* Papers. Before her death, Barnes asked her own literary executor, Hank O'Neal, to help publish the Baroness's poems. Although he kept in his possession several visual poems, that elusive collection remained unpublished.

Neither the Baroness nor Djuna Barnes left instructions for how the poetry should be arranged. The Baroness's entire poetic oeuvre is a rhizome, clusters of higher resonances within a more general but related frequency exploring sensual experience and the body. Her multiple versions can be read as her working through a theme from different angles, which seemed to us the most appropriate way of arranging the oeuvre. Consequently, in organizing the poetry, we deliberately avoided the standard linear chronology to emphasize the thematic of body and embodiment central to the Baroness's pioneering Dada. Although all of the Baroness's poems included in this anthology are corporeally charged, we have foregrounded seven kinds of sensory explorations: the erotic and eroticized body, the body in movement and function, the spatially transgressive body exploring land- and cityscapes, the transcendent body engaged in philosophical contemplation, the decaying body, and the artistic body—the body as aestheticized and aestheticizing. The Baroness's longer poems synthesize, with the benefit of their expansiveness, all of these bodily experiences. Exceptions to this thematic order are found in the form-based clusters in parts VI and VII, which feature the Baroness's most pronounced literary experiments in border blurring: her sonic and visual poems. Her innovative criticism in prose poetry, which caustically confronted modernism itself, is found at the end of part X. Appendix A presents a typescript of "Spectrum," one of her longer poems, and appendix B presents responses by her contemporaries, including Maxwell Bodenheim, Jane Heap, and Evelyn Scott.

Not being bound by time period or even geographic locale, the poems, as showcased here, allow persistent patterns to emerge across time, continents, and age, both illuminating individual selections and facilitating access into the complexity of the Baroness's work. Based on the nuanced and diverse explorations of the body, the thematic structure of this collection enables readers to ask some of the same questions she herself raised, such as: What constitutes a work of art? How do we appreciate it? Embracing a DIY mentality, never afraid to think for herself, the Baroness encourages audiences to do so as well. We present the poems as they were composed, meant, in keeping with the Baroness's career-long attempts at a dissolution of the boundary between artist and audience, to be collaborations with their readers, whose own

complexities and differences will find multiple and varied points of entry into the poems.

Within each part, we have attempted to create optimal readability by pairing more heavily textual poems with ones that rely on the open space of the page. We have also attempted to juxtapose the Baroness's particularly moribund poems with those that revel in her liberating humor. As a collection, the poems progress from a queering of heterosexual desire to a more general queering of normative gender and generic representation, and so signal the enormous potentiality and multiplicity of the poet and her poetry. The Baroness's "borderblur" is also evident in the paratexts that accompany the poetry: dedications, epigraphs, commentary in margins, alternative renderings to escape censorship.⁷⁰ Since paratexts are the fringes that control our reading of the text, as Gérard Genette writes in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, we reproduce dedications and epigraphs alongside the poetry.⁷¹ Other marginalia (including discussions with Barnes regarding the poetry) is reproduced in notes.

As editors, we take on the role the Baroness appointed to Barnes: that of deciphering her not-yet-finished from her stronger, more completed work. Additionally, given the constraints of space in this edition, we did not include fragments or visibly unfinished poems. Like Barnes, we give you the Baroness in her own "crimsoncruising yell," a voice that thrills in its liberation, defiance, and faith in the transformative power of art. The voice of this "future futurist," as the Baroness calls herself in "Love—Chemical Relationship," so far ahead of its time in the 1920s, is finally, after a full century since her first arrival in New York, ready to be heard.

We provide a note for each poem with detailed information about the poem's textual genealogy, the choice of copy text and its variants, along with the Baroness's own commentary, editors' comments, and emendations (see Notes on the Poetry, pages 339–394).

SOURCES AND PRINCIPLES OF SELECTIONS

The vast majority of poems printed in this book are based on EvFL's handwritten manuscripts, or typescripts prepared by DB and corrected in the Baroness's hand. They are held in the EvFL Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Library (UML), and *The Little Review* (Chicago, Ill.) Records, 1914–1964, UWM Manuscript

Collection 1, University Manuscript Collection, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries (UWM). Twenty-one poems are reprinted from *The Little Review* (LR), as the manuscripts are no longer extant. The source for each poem is identified in Notes on the Poetry. To date, only a German selection of the Baroness's poems has been published, entitled *Mein Mund ist lüsteren/I got Lusting Palate: Dada-Verse von Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven* (edited by Irene Gammel, 2005). *Body Sweats* offers the first English-language edition presenting EvFL's original compositions, as well as her own translations of her German poetry into English. Moreover, she also translated her English poetry into German, and since translation was a creative process for the poet, who often recreated the spirit of a poem in the target language rather than literally translating, it is sometimes impossible to determine which version is the original and which is translated.

Many of EvFL's poems have multiple variants and a close, discriminating reading of these, together with the biographical knowledge we have of the poet, allows us to follow the evolution of a particular poem to its most finalized form, which we showcase here. Significantly, many of the unpublished poems were "freshened," as EvFL calls it in a note to DB, and corrected between 1924 and 1925, the years that she and DB conceived of gathering EvFL's work for a collection of poems. Many of these poems contain EvFL's notes to herself or DB, indicating that a particular copy was the most "improved" or that a given copy contained an essential change. With the help of such demarcations, we have identified the final, clean copy among a sequence of variants in progress. Sometimes these copies were typed by DB and so suggest a greater level of finality as approved by her editorial eye. At other times, only one version of a poem is extant. For the most part, the unpublished poems are undated, requiring us to reconstruct approximate dates using marginalia and biographical evidence.

EDITORIAL PRINCIPLES AND METHODOLOGIES

We have remained faithful to EvFL's experimental punctuation, spelling, and layout, all of which comprise an essential part of her aesthetic. Self-conscious about her command of English (her second language), EvFL regularly consulted with DB on grammar and usage in comments throughout her letters and in the marginalia

of her manuscript poems. In some instances, EvFL also voiced concern about a number of misprints in her poems published in *The Little Review*. Some of her typical mistakes include confusion of *than/then*, omission of “e” in past tense, as in *speckld* instead of *speckled*, or typos such as *agressive* instead of *aggressive*. Thus, only the most evident spelling, typing, or typesetting errors are standardized and corrections listed below.

In contrast to the consistent capitalization in EvFL’s handwritten manuscripts, most of the typescripts and published poetry present standard use of upper- and lowercase. We capitalize only the first letter of each line. Words that EvFL underlined for emphasis are rendered in italics. Verse lines that run to multiple lines are printed with a hanging indentation. In a few cases where poems are missing the titles, as in “[Spring Cleaning]” and “[George Antheil],” these titles have been provided using the first or last words of the poem, as practiced by EvFL herself. Main titles are displayed in capital letters. In some poems, EvFL provides elaborate subtitles or epigraphs following the main title and preceding the beginning of the poem proper; these subtitles or inscriptions appear in small capital letters. Dedications are inserted in italics on a separate line immediately following the title.

Finally, we recognize that many of the poems are signed “Else,” the German spelling of her name. However, the American spelling is also found in documents and was encouraged by Djuna Barnes. In transcriptions, we keep the German version intact but employ the American spelling in our discussions of the artist, consistent with how she became known following her arrival in New York.