



*Spelling Errors As a Cry of Protest.
The Idiosyncratic Language
of the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-
Loringhoven*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Elsa Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven was one of the most popular writers and artists of her time and a figure of great prominence in both European and American avant-garde movements; yet criticism has neglected her until recently, mainly because of the daring contents of her writing, which often prevented her works from being published. She has only recently been addressed by both literature and language scholars – as well as by art critics and experts of the performing arts – who have finally acknowledged the relevance of her contribution to women’s modernist art and literature.

Most of her writings are in English, either because she translated them from German, her native language, or because she endeavoured to always write in English after she moved to America in her thirties. Since her writings in English are rich in spelling errors which can hardly be always ascribable to her status as a non-native English speaker, and which seem sometimes rather intentional, this article aims at a preliminary linguistic approach to some of Elsa’s poems and autobiographical extracts. While it seems challenging at the very least to explain Elsa’s many spelling oddities and linguistic poetic license, this article tries to shed some light on some linguistic



inconsistencies – which seem in fact to conform to an interesting pattern of non-acquiescence and protest.

A few words on Elsa's biography will therefore help us profile her peculiarities as a writer, and investigate potential origins and reasons of her idiosyncratic use of the English language. A very brief overview of her early stages as an artist will also help us find an orientation in her heterogeneous corpus and out-of-the-ordinary bilingualism.

2. GEOGRAPHIC, ARTISTIC AND LINGUISTIC MIGRATIONS

Else Hildegard Plötz was born in Sweinemünde to Adolf Plötz and Ida Marie Kleist. Her childhood in the paternal house was a theatre of violence, in which her father, a stern and authoritative man, abused both Else and her mother. Although she hated him for having infected both of them with syphilis and a urinal infection, she had contradictory feelings towards him and often described him as a handsome man with a magnetic personality, virile, muscular and attractive. To this phase of Elsa's life, Irene Gammel (the so far leading scholar on the Baroness) traces the (later to become) Baroness's hatred of the bourgeois, which is worth mentioning, given the role it will have on the mature writer. Specifically, bourgeois façades of respectability and decency prevented her mother from confessing that her husband had infected her, and she did not get treated for the diseases until it was too late. Furthermore, when Elsa's father took an iconic bourgeois woman as their step-mother while his children were still mourning their mother, Elsa felt she could not bear to live in the house anymore, and fled to Berlin, where she began her life as an artist.

Once she had left her father's house, she explored the main centres of the avant-garde in Germany. She studied art in Dachau and came in contact with *Jugendstil* in Munich; there she met August Endell, the *Jugendstil* architect whom she married in 1901. Elsa entertained an open relationship with her husband, and soon became involved with a friend of Endell's, the poet and translator Felix Paul Greve (who later changed his identity to become the Canadian author Frederick Philip Grove). After the three of them visited Palermo and Rome – Elsa had a studio in Rome for a while, supported by sculptor Richard Schmitz – Elsa separated from Endell and married Greve, with whom she returned to Germany. It was Berlin, this time, which made the most significant impression on Elsa's newly born artistic sensibility; her coming to Berlin is acknowledged to be a page-turner in Elsa's artistic biography, as the place where she evolved into the sexually free, anti-bourgeois, rebel artist that we know today. In *Fanny Essler*, the novel Felix Greve wrote about his wife and to which Elsa potentially contributed, the Berlin-experience is described as follows:

Fannys erster Tag in Berlin war wie eine Erwachen. [...] Jetzt merkte sie plötzlich, daß sie während all der langen Monate nur eins getan hatte: sie hatte geträumt.



Von wem geträumt, wovon? Von einer unbestimmten Zukunft [...] Sie dachte an ihre letzte Vergangenheit: da hatte alles geschlafen: ihr Blut und ihre Sinne. Wie eine Nachtwanderin hatte sie gelebt. (Grieve 1905 :3)¹

Unfortunately, this new anti-conformist persona – even defined as proto-punk (Hughes 1997: 70) – lacked the social standing that would make her rebellious position philosophical and intellectual (unlike Nietzsche’s friend Lou Salomé), and Elsa ended up being harshly attacked by public opinion.

In search for more sexually and artistically open-minded *milieux* she sailed to America. Her entrance in New York in 1910 can be described as theatrical at the very least: she walked into Fifth-Avenue society dressed in a man’s suit and smoking a cigarette, to protest against both sexual disparities and the tobacco industry. To her resentment, she was promptly arrested and an article was written about her in the *New York Times*, denouncing her indecency, “She Wore Men’s Clothes.” From this first histrionic appearance, her life in New York ran on the edge of a paradoxical paradigm, as she was both a protagonist and an outsider. While decreed mad and perverted by public opinion, she was acknowledged as the first female Dada and welcomed in avant-garde circles which included Duchamp, Pound and Hemingway.

In New York she also became acquainted with Djuna Barnes, who in those years was making her own way through Greenwich Village avant-garde as a journalist and caricaturist for several newspapers and magazines. Their friendship is of great relevance to our investigation of Elsa’s use of the English language, since she often turned to Djuna for advice on linguistic issues. Djuna was in her turn mesmerised by Elsa’s personality and the commitment of her art, which could attract or repel, yet was undeniably fascinating. As Barnes often recorded in her letters or diaries, Elsa “batiqued her tailored suites, made earrings from grave-flowers and Christmas tree decorations, and had a voice and constitution of iron,” yet “she was very difficult to know.” (Herring and Stutman 2005: 254)

While on one hand Elsa made radical choices, she very rarely gave explanations for her often absurd behaviours; her art-name “Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven,” for a start, is quite enigmatic, and it challenged friends and scholarship. A few months after the 1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art in New York (she was quite notorious by this time, having been launched by Frank Crowninshield in *Vanity Fair* as the most extreme champion of American Dada) she married the German expatriate, Leopold Karl Friedrich Baron von Freytag-Loringhoven, thus becoming ‘Baroness Elsa’. While the slight change in her birth-name (from Else to Elsa) is easily explained by the intention to be naturalised an American citizen, the acquisition of the aristocratic title is harder to justify; in fact, the third wedding itself seems hard to fit in with her hatred of anything aristocratic or bourgeois – a strange marriage indeed, especially if we consider that it ended soon afterwards, when the Baron embarked for Europe to enrol

¹ The translation is mine: “Fanny’s first day in Berlin was like an awakening. [...] Now she realised suddenly that during the past months she had been doing one thing only: she had been dreaming. About whom, about what? About an undefined future. [...] She thought about her recent past; everything in her had slept: her blood and mind. She had lived like a dreamwalker.”



as a volunteer in the German Army during the First World War, and they never saw each other again. Even more strikingly she maintained the aristocratic title (which did not guarantee her even minimal financial support) after he died, and kept it until her own death. According to the scholar Irene Gammel, Elsa wore the title as a provocation, a “red flag to declare her cultural aristocracy in democratic America.” (Gammel 2003: 161)

3. “IT IS MORE BEAUTIFULL – ENGLISH!”

Elsa’s name in art “Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven” (rather than the German formula *Baronin*) also encapsulates her transnational profile and her double identity as a German-born American artist; this duplicity is mirrored by her linguistic choices, which appear more complicated to explore than her geographical wanderings. While she explicitly chose English over German for all her writings, there are indelible trails of German everywhere in her poems and prose writings that offer an incredibly interesting field of investigation.

As anticipated, Elsa began to write in English once she moved to America, so only in her thirties; such a choice seems to be consistent with the reasons why she was leaving Germany, which she perceived as chauvinistic and castrating in its traditional culture – although she was in great awe of the German classics – and quite exclusive in its male Expressionist avant-garde.² Her commitment in embracing the English language was so complete, that she translated all the poems she had written in German.

For radical as it was, Elsa’s adoption of the English language was gradual and very interesting to track. Before moving permanently to New York, she went to Cincinnati on the Ohio River, which boasted a great number of German-American societies, and had a German theatre with regular performances in Turner Hall. There, in 1912, she wrote “Herr Peu à Peu,” a poem composed in a playful mixture of German and English:

Herr Peu à Peu

Er ist our distinguished conductor
In Cincinnati – Der City of Pork –
So kommt er mir gedruckt vor
Genannt ist er Georg

² In fact, German Expressionism did feature at least one noteworthy woman artist, Else Lasker-Schüler (1869-1945), wife (1901-1911) to Expressionist Herwarth Walden, who was the editor of *Der Sturm*, the main journal of German Expressionism. Lasker-Schüler’s and von Freytag-Loringhoven’s work and attitude towards both writing and visual art seem to be akin to many respects. However, there is no historical validation to the legitimate suspect that the two women might have met, nor to the even more likely conjecture that von Freytag-Loringhoven might have read the works of her fellow German writer before engaging in writing herself.



Im Türmenden Gemäuer –
Darling – starling – prince!
Umständlich wärs auch teuer
Wärst du conductor in Binz.
(Gammel 2003: 153)

Although this poem does not show the elliptical style of later poems, it displays her taste for linguistic hybridisation and mongrelisation, which she later took to extreme experimentation. This poem could be simply – and indeed legitimately – read as an intermediary stage in the shift from German to English; but it triggers further reflection if reconsidered in the light of Elsa's own considerations on language issues, or in the light of later poems.

Before venturing into the minefield of the Baroness's spelling oddities, it seems useful to consider one specific letter that Elsa addressed to Djuna Barnes. To Djuna the Baroness confessed that she was "aroused by English sound – and depressed by German," and wrote the following poem in bright red ink:

I hate hate
Hate something
About German
Sound – words
That "longoutdrawnness –"

Other side
English I translated it from
German into English –
It is more beautifull
English! Though words
are as good as identical!
(Gammel and Zelazo 2011: 262)

Even though these few lines are dated 1923-1926, they refer quite explicitly to the adoption of the English language in the 1910s; in fact, they formalise a tendency to only use English of the poems written after she moved to America. Moreover, they support the remark that the Baroness's allegiance to the English language was irreversible: even when, in 1921, she returned to Germany and France, never to go back to New York, she continued to write in English until her death. However, German never disappears completely. Even in the poem where she despises German, there are interferences from her native language. Alongside more neutral spelling errors like 'beautifull', spurs of German are quite evident: "longoutdrawnness," for instance, echoes the very common German word-formation process which consists of compound words. The presence of an Anglicised *Kompositum* fits in the very peculiar frame of the Baroness's hybridised language, but also highlights one of the main dichotomies of her style: in the very poem where she openly devotes herself to English



instead, she misspells English words and echoes the word-formation mechanisms of her native language. Despite hating the sound of German, she seems attracted to the possibility of condensing complex meanings into one word, in a kind of lexical and conceptual cohesion that does not exist in English. From this viewpoint, the odd spelling of “longoutdrawnness” seems no longer an error, but a stance on the right of the poet to mould language to her purpose.

Further evidence of the Baroness’s contradictory attitude towards the German language, according to which she avoids German until she cannot resist the allure of the perfect word, can be found in a poem dedicated to Duchamp, “Love – Chemical Relationship.” The poem is written in a mock-Old English, with “thou”s, “thee”s and verbs in “-st” second person singular, which describe but a mundane context. The poem also presents itself as a trans-linguistic board from the very inscription “Un enfant Français: Marcel (A Futurist).” Then, as the verses proceed spaced out by the typical long dash, the verse “Unity – Einklang – harmony – Zweifellosigkeit!” comes all of a sudden to surprise the reader. The German words *Einklang* (“harmony”) and *Zweifellosigkeit* (“indubitability”) amplify the sense of wholeness conveyed by the English words. The way in which German words are here nonchalantly alternated with English words seems to be in contrast with the praxis of translating her own poems from German to English.

Widening the scope to the Baroness’s whole poetic production in English, though, the incursion of German words or structures emerges as a pattern: she seems to use German words when she cannot find a satisfactory translation in English. Regardless of whether she actively thought that German offered richer lexical textures, or whether instead she only unconsciously felt that semantic stratification was sometimes better met by German compounds, it is self-evident that German words occur every time she could not find an adequate English equivalent. In the light of this pattern, the words “I hate hate hate” need to be reconsidered, and the “longoutdrawnness” she declares to despise seems to be precisely what she obtains. In fact, being the Baroness here considered, who was all but a stranger to love-hate relationships (with her father, with men in general, with Germany itself), a contradictory feeling towards the language she is trying to avoid is perfectly plausible. Indeed, her poem reads like the author is endeavouring to fleet from a language (and a past) which yet persecutes her, i.e. lays its compounding structures down even where words are translated into English.

On such questions the debate is certainly open. The Baroness left no reading instruction for her poems, nor did she provide editors (not even Djuna) with explanations for the undeniably relevant presence of German in her writing in English. From what we can observe, though, crossing linguistic borders conforms to the Baroness’s *modus operandi*: as she moved freely across European and American centres of avant-garde, she absorbed ideas without ever conforming to their schemes; she hybridised art-forms; she rejected gender-roles and crossed them in such ways that are impossible to define. In such a frame of mind, one that qualifies the Baroness as a writer impossible to qualify under any label, we need to look at her use of English as a minefield of both casual and intentional spelling oddities, spontaneous



neologisms and linguistic cross-breedings, naïve misspellings and deliberate extravagances.

4. MISSPELLING CONSISTENCY IN A SYNTACTIC CABARET

Several times Djuna Barnes advised her friend to write an autobiography, offered to edit it and endeavoured to see it published. Unfortunately, the Baroness never finished it, and Djuna Barnes did not succeed in having it published; yet, Elsa wrote enough for us to witness a considerable amount of linguistic errors, and to debate on the possible causes of such mistakes. Although Elsa sent fair and revised copies of her drafts to Djuna – as Elsa pointed out in the letters – she did not correct all the spelling mistakes. The following extract from the autobiography is representative of Elsa's idiosyncratic prose, written in upper case and displaying the long dash as dominating punctuation mark.

MY FATHER MARRIED SHORTLY AFTER MY MOTHERS FUNERAL ABOUT 3 MONTHS
– A SECOND TIME A VERY UNUSUAL PROCEEDING ESPECIALY INTO THE FACE OF
TWO GROWN DAUGHTERS OF 17 AND 18 [...] IF IT POSSIBLY COULD TURNOUT
THAT WAY MY SISTER – AND MYSELF BEING UNCONGENIAL FROM CHILDHOOD
BY TEMPERAMENT ALSO SHE WAS ENGAGED TO BE MARRIED – [...] MY FATHER
CAME DOWN TO HIS LIKE FOR HIS LIFETROTT THIS TIME – WHO COULD BLAME
HIM – BUT I – AND MY DEAD MOTHER?
(Hjartarson and Spettigue 1992: 36)

The passage above is undoubtedly a minefield of oddities which include semantic, syntactic and graphological anomalies. The second line, beginning after the long dash (as it is difficult to isolate sentences), appears condensed and elliptical (of the verb), and resembles more a collage of syntagmatic structures forcibly put next one another, rather than a proper sequence of clauses. The central lines, again interrupted by the dash (which would not be needed syntactically) present incomplete units of sense, while "also" occurs as a grammatical oddity, as it introduces a new idea which does not follow nor completely relate to the previous one. The final sequence shows again missing parts, such as "came down to his," next to a lexical anomaly, "lifetroot;" in fact, the last few lines of the extract verge even more on the incomprehensible, mainly conveying a sense of unease of the writer when she speaks about her conflicting relationship with her father.

In the extract, spelling results in the least evident of anomalies, which go almost unnoticed in what reads like a syntactic jam session, or a linguistic collage. However, it is convenient to draw attention on a few spelling errors, which gain relevance when related to the bigger picture of the whole autobiography, and to the (here upcoming) consideration of the poetic work. For instance, such spelling anomalies as "-ly" instead of "-lly" in adverbs ending in "-l", as in "especialy" or (elsewhere) in "actualy" turn out to be self-consistent throughout the autobiography. Just as often in the autobiography,



she omits the apostrophe in the Saxon genitive – as in the German formation process – and makes compounds out of verbs with prepositions such as “turnout” – once again in a (reversed) German way. Alongside those occurring in the passage quoted, many other spelling irregularities appear consistently in her autobiography; for instance, she always spells “people” as *”people” and frequently omits the letter “c” in words such as “excitement” or “acknowledge”; she abuses the hyphen as a word-connector (*”after-all”) and doubles the final “-l” of the adjectival suffix “-ful”, as in *”beautifull” or *”playfull.”

Sometimes, her spelling errors also have semantic implications, as is the case with her use of “were” instead of “where” and of “than” for “then”. Mistranslated Germanisms also occur with considerable regularity, such as “become” to mean “get” (from the German verb *bekommen*). Many of these spelling errors can be certainly ascribed to the fact that English was not the Baroness’s native language and that she only learned it in her thirties. However, she appeared quite aware of her linguistic errors, and suggested that she was unwilling to correct them. While today’s scholarship has marked her errors as idiosyncratic, it seems likely that the Baroness herself held them as a sort of distinguishing trait. Evidence of such an impression can be seen in the fact that her life-time poems in English, including those written after the autobiography, exacerbate (instead of correcting) the misspelling tendencies of the autobiography.

In addition, and more interestingly perhaps, there seem to be a strong influence of the author’s emotion on both the clarity of the syntax and the correctness of the spelling. The Baroness herself confessed to be aware of such connection, when she wrote as follows in a letter to Djuna Barnes enclosed to some pages of her autobiography:

DJUNA – I KNOW ESPECIALY IN THE FIRST PART – IT IS WRITTEN LIKE HALF MAD IN SYNTAX – LATER IT BECOMES A *LITTLE* BETTER. THERE ARE 3 REASONS FOR IT: 1. I AM HALF MAD – AS IS ONLY SENSIBLE. 2. I CANNOT TELL EVENTS BUT BE CARRIED BY EMOTION INTO A FANCY WORLD OF SPIRITUAL REALITY – AS YOU KNOW. 3. I BEGIN TO BE CLUMSY WITH ENGLISH EXPRESSIONS NOT COMING READILY ANYMORE.

(Hjartarson and Spettigue 1992: 37)

Of the three reasons the Baroness advances to justify her own peculiar use of English, only the last (*and* least) one considers the fact that she was no native speaker. Writing in English must have certainly been an effort, considering that at this point of her life she had just left America to go back to a post-war Germany. Yet, she expresses herself as perfectly aware of pushing the limits of spelling and syntax – in a way that mirrors, in fact, her non-acquiescence towards any sort of regulation. In this respect, the first two reasons provide most relevant explanations, which reveal the connection between syntax and emotion. The first one in particular prepares us, for instance, for



such extracts which actually read “mad in syntax” as the following one, taken from the first few pages of the autobiography.

For I did not acknowledge children. So intensely I declined them that for very long I secretly always somehow doubted their close connection with “making love” – but the clap and later syphilis I took like a Trojan battle. That was consequence and logic. Wounds that – after healing – made one more fit – blood of dragon – love – turning one immune for injury. (Hjartarson and Spettigue 1992: 46)

Spelling errors in the passage quoted have been (whether or not legitimately) corrected by the editors, and some dashes have been replaced with actual punctuation; however, we can still witness the Baroness’s self-confessed “mad syntax.” A sort of emotional logic keeps the sentences together and connects fragments of her life like in a free association of ideas. Perhaps, the long dash is indeed the only punctuation mark that could possibly justify her jumping from one moment of her life to another; commas and periods do not really apply to the inconsequential and far more emotional connections between clauses. If we imagine the original text, with dashes every few words and upper case, spelling oddities appear more clearly as a deliberate choice, and contribute to making her language “mad.”

The second reason advanced by the Baroness partly explains the alteration of syntactical relations that we have just analysed; while events are arranged chronologically in the autobiography, they are accompanied by personal comments, associations of ideas which are “carried by emotion,” and digressions where she sometimes condenses her own feelings in long and chaotic syntactic agglomerations. As we will see, this process of association becomes harder to follow in the poems, which are sometimes so elliptical (even hermetic) that it is difficult to track the emotional connections between the verses.

5. SPELLING ODDITIES AND WORD-FORMATION

Elsa’s taste for building compounds, which occur frequently but “bearably” in the autobiography, becomes more intense in the poems, where compounds are a dominating trait and sometimes prove difficult to follow. In the poems the Baroness makes a conspicuous use of the portmanteau, a typical technique of the transnational urban avant-garde, concerned with exploring processes of mechanisation through the language. To this technique, also employed by other women writers of the time (including Mina Loy, another interesting case study for her idiosyncratic mongrelised language), Elsa added her own personal idiosyncrasies. As recalled by Gammel and Zelazo on the dust jacket of *Body Sweats*, “when she tired of existing words, she created new ones: ‘Phalluspistol,’ ‘spinsterlollipop,’ kissambushed.” Indeed, her portmanteau neologisms are often not easy to interpret, like the word “fieldadmarshmiralshall” in *To Home*; it is obtained from a peculiar blending “field



marshal” and “admiral;”³ yet, the phrase “field marshal” reminds one of the German spelling (*Feldmarschall*) of which the Baroness abandons the German “sch” for the English “sh”, but keeps the German final “-ll”.

As briefly shown, the reading becomes quite laborious when portmanteau and spelling errors (often caused by German interferences) converge in the same word. This is further complicated by the fact that many poems are extremely elliptical, often made up of one-word verses which display a whirling carousel of flashing images. In this respect, the poem *Ty – ry! (Imperial Sunwedding)* is quite representative, since it contains no less than 132 one-word verses (with the exception of the first verse), many of which are obtained through compounding and blending. To quote just a few meaningful sequences:

TY –
RY!
(IMPERIAL
SUNWEDDING)

Giltbronze brushwood
Limbbare
Against:
Ash-ivory –
Crimson –
Poppy –
Azure –
Violet –
Lemon –
Kaleidoscopwadded –
Snowerminepelt – – –
[...]
Prepare –
Approach –
Farafield –
Frolicksteaming –
Gleaming – –
Birthvictors –
Venturesome
Raymajesty –
Emperor
Sunpapa’s
Imperial
Stateembrace –
Wondrous

³ In addition, the resulting blended word assembles letters in such a way that “dad” appears, which sounds as a suspicious coincidence, since we know that young Else perceived her father’s authority as an almost military influence.



Kissgarlandgloss

Ty –

Ry!

[...]

(Gammel and Zelazo 2011: 177-178)

The Baroness's compounds appear very often as phrases which she writes as one word despite knowing that they should not be compounded together. The fact that she elsewhere uses the same words written properly confirms that her "errors" are completely intentional. Looking at her poetic work as a whole, compounding and blending emerge as linguistic patterns, as if language were a system that she could deconstruct and reassemble, a tool through which she could create ideas and expressivities. This sense of a physical, manual relationship with language, which she treats like modelling clay, is also suggested by the fact that she always wrote her poems by hand, even though the typewriter was largely employed by writers at the time.

In light of these considerations, compounds appear to suit several points of view, none of which contradicts the others. The hypothesis that she did not notice her own errors seems increasingly unlikely, only remaining valid in a few cases of interference from German words with a similar spelling. For most spelling oddities, however, her status as a non-native English speaker does not suffice as an explanation. More articulated criticism focuses rather on Elsa's attitude to transgressing rules, language being essentially a regulated system of communication that needs questioning like any other. According to Rudolf E. Kunzli, the disruption of the American language is Elsa's ultimate response to American cultural shallowness, brought about by consumerism and commodification of art. For Kunzli, she attacks language as the vehicle of a degraded system of values, trying to reach at the core of (a forgotten) meaning.

The Baroness's Dadaist poems therefore disrupt American language and form part of her attempt to transform American culture through everything she did [...] [one strategy] consists in charging words with a high degree of passion and emotion, a practice which recalls [...] futurist-expressionist words sequences. She writes in short units, one or two words, separated by line breaks, dashes and exclamation points. She sacrifices syntax to the importance of isolated words, which are nevertheless interlinked in a semantic field. (Kunzli 2001: 461)

As she challenged language on the levels of spelling, word-formation and syntax, the Baroness protested most fiercely against consumerism and commodities, against the exploitation involved in such dynamics and against the deriving impoverishment of art and aesthetics.

In line with such beliefs, continues Kunzli, she sometimes even decided to "avoid the American language altogether by writing sound poetry." (Kunzli 2001: 463) While Kunzli and others refer to the Baroness's phonetic poems alluding to a certain connection to Italian Futurism, her use of sound poetry seems ideologically different.



Her sound poems might indeed contain reminiscences from her time in Italy and her contact with the Futurists; yet phonetic verses are not, for her, the “language of trauma,” the sound made by poets “to protest the sounds of cannons of World War I” (Gammel 2011: 15). Her acoustic poems are free, in fact, from any avant-garde practice, and independent from any ready-made choices. They originate from the assumption that traditional verbal language cannot voice the deeply sensorial and performative dimension of reality.

TEKE HEART

Qvixfrinjachléde – jachleide – jachmosa – Mosa – achmosa – qvarksirnk – ach –
qvarlsé Kalstu ljasab – rinne vrusta –
Acha aché –
Jach – ché?
[...]
Acke flasse – qvmk. Teke
Achm – té
Ackm –tk – kté!
A – ja – ja hachm ackm sjrinstre –
[...]
(Gammel and Zelazo 2011: 184)

“Teke Heart” proves that sounds reproduce an extra-lexical stammering, which is closer to pure sensation and emotion than words could possibly be. The poem has the structure of a conversation, as is suggested by line-breaks, question marks and exclamation marks; thus, the Baroness suggests that communication needs to be liberated from the constricting frame of linguistic coherence. Since it is *human* language that needs deconstruction, rather than particular languages, it is irrelevant to investigate which language the sounds belong to: whether “ach” and “ja” belong to German, or “é” and “ché” might come from French or Italian, is no longer a crucial issue. The point seems to be rather that sounds capture, and somehow fill, the gap between sensory perception and the acquisition of meaning, because although they dislocate meaning, sounds do activate new meanings in a proliferation of fusions and fractures.

If we look at the Baroness’s progression in disrupting language, from spelling errors to compounding, blending and omitting, her phonetic poems appear more like a gradual praxis of transcending language (rather than rejecting it) to touch pure meaning, which lies in the senses.

In view of such considerations, spelling errors of any extent can hardly ever be considered as neutral or casual. In this sense, Gammel and Zelazo’s editorial choice never to correct spelling oddities upon publishing the first uncensored edition of the Baroness’s poems confirms that her errors cannot be avoided or corrected when aiming at a full comprehension of her corpus.



6. CONCLUSIONS: THE WEIGHT OF BEING *ERRATIC*

The Baroness's aesthetics were transgressive, committed to demonstrating against every aspect of consumerism, above all the commodification of art. Her disruption of verbal language was but one of her many transgressions. Her protest – which, it is worth mentioning, was never political or openly feminist – took countless different forms, most of which were extreme, none of which were free of consequences.

Records provide evidence of the most anarchic social behaviours: when she introduced herself to *The Little Review* office with her head shaved and dressed in the crêpe she “stole [...] from the door of a house of mourning” (Anderson 1930: 211); when she paraded on fashionable Fifth Avenue wearing black lipstick, fake eyelashes made of parrot-feathers, American stamps on her cheeks, skirts decorated with horse blanket pins and electric batteries and tomato cans as accessories; when she was arrested for stripping off near Central Park in a demonstration against dress-coding and the clothes industries. In other words, the Baroness made a work of art out of her own body and profile, so that she became an icon, a persona, more than just a writer and artist. Unsurprisingly, she was highly misunderstood in her time, lived on the edge of poverty and in and out of prison, constantly disapproved of by bourgeois self-righteous respectability. She was diagnosed psychologically unstable, hysterical, perverted and mad, singled out as a social agitator.

Being at once marginalised and constantly in the spotlight is one of the ways in which she appealed to her avant-garde fellow-writers who, from Pound to Hemingway, endeavoured to see her works published in both America and Paris – where she spent the last few years of her life. Despite their efforts, however, only less than half of her very heterogeneous corpus was published when she was alive “for,” she complained, “magazines are opposed to my very name.” (Gammel 2003: 5) Not even Anderson and Heap's *The Little Review*, the major publisher of her works, could sometimes overcome the prohibitions of censorship.⁴

The earliest interest in unearthing the Baroness's work rose in the 1990s with Hjartarson and Spettigue's edition of Elsa's autobiography (in which spelling errors and linguistic inconsistencies were however corrected), finally being published after Barnes's several failed attempts. Attention to her work was however mainly subordinated to (or at least originated from) studies on her naturalised-Canadian second husband F.P. Grove, who was a well-known novelist. Only in the 2000s did the

⁴ One of the Baroness's drawings was used as cover-picture on *The Little Review* in relation to the obscenity trial over the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. After *The Little Review* published the “Nausicaa” episode of *Ulysses* in the 1920 July–August issue of the magazine, the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice instigated obscenity charges against editors Margaret Caroline Anderson and Jane Heap. Hence, the Baroness became one of the most active supporters of the magazine, advocating that sexuality be set free from puritan costumes and traditions. As emphatically phrased by Gammel: “If Heap was the field marshal for *The Little Review's* vanguard battle against puritan conventions and traditional sexual aesthetics, then the Baroness was to become its fighting machine.” (Gammel 2003: 240)



Baroness begin to find herself the object of criticism, largely thanks to Irene Gammel's 2003 *Baroness Elsa* and 2011 *Body Sweats*. Now that her central role in early twentieth-century transnational avant-garde has been rediscovered, interest in the Baroness can only grow and studies on her proliferate. The implications of her uncompromising aesthetics are wide-spread and trigger investigation in several fields of research, from literature to linguistics, from the visual arts to performance studies, in the true spirit of an avant-garde artist who advocated that art be liberated from all attempts to restrain or categorise it.

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