

Living Dada

Paul Hjartarson
University of Alberta

When she is dada she is the only one living anywhere
who dresses dada, loves dada, lives dada.

*Jane Heap writing in The Little Review
about the Baroness*

IRENE GAMMEL'S *BARONESS ELSA* is the first book-length, scholarly biography of the German-born Dada poet and artist, Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven.¹ It is a significant achievement. Gammel's biography is a milestone in the current reassessment of the Baroness² and of the role of women in New York Dada (and in modernism generally); it is also an important contribution to work in several fields, including the study of how ideas move from one nation, language, and culture to another. By the early twenties, the Baroness had already become a legendary figure in modernist circles. "Paris has had Dada for five years," John Rodker declared in *The Little Review* in the summer of 1920, "and we have had Else von Freytag-Loringhoven for quite two years"; he adds: "In Else von

- 1 In this review article, I shall discuss only Irene Gammel's *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada and Everyday Modernity—A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002. Pp. 568. \$60 [hardcover], \$33 [paperback]).
- 2 The Baroness was born Else Plötz but, as Gammel puts it, she "Americanized" the spelling of her name sometime after her arrival in the United States (xxv). Although most scholars refer to her as "Elsa," some prefer "Else" and at least one uses "Else" when referring to her German years and "Elsa" when writing of her life in the United States. On this subject, see Hjartarson and Kulba (xxxiv n3).

PAUL HJARTARSON

is a Professor in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta. A specialist in nineteenth and twentieth century Canadian literature and print culture, his recent publications include (ed. with D. O. Spettigue) *Baroness Elsa: The Autobiography of the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven* (1992) and (ed. with Tracy Kulba) *Borne Across the World: Else Plöetz (Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven), Felix Paul Greve (Frederick Philip Grove) and the Politics of Cultural Mediation* (2003).

Freytag-Loringhoven Paris is mystically united [with] New York” (33). The legend of the Baroness continues to grow: a one-person play, *The Last of the Red-Hot Dadas*, written by Kerry Reid and starring Christina Augello, tours internationally; a recent fashion photo essay in the *New York Times Magazine*, “My Heart Belongs to Dada,” focussed on her life and dress; and René Steinke, author of *The Fires*, is at work on a novel, *Holy Skirts*, set in Greenwich Village and centered on her life. At the outset of his chapter on the Baroness in *New York Dada 1915–23*, Francis M. Naumann quotes Rodker’s comments regarding the Baroness and terms her “a critical link between the American and European avant-garde” (33). That link is also explored in the recently published collection of essays, *The Politics of Cultural Mediation: Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Felix Paul Greve*. Like Naumann, Gammel quotes Rodker’s observation, but her biography, more than any previous study, seeks to understand the role of the Baroness in the mediation of culture.

In the memories, artwork and life writing of modernists involved in the New York scene between 1915 and 1923—Berenice Abbott, Margaret Anderson, Djuna Barnes, George Biddle, Hart Crane, Marcel Duchamp, Jane Heap, Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams come immediately to mind—the Baroness invariably makes an appearance. Usually a very dramatic appearance. In *An American Artist’s Story*, for example, George Biddle describes the Baroness’s arrival at his Philadelphia art studio in the spring of 1917:

Having asked me, in her harsh, high-pitched German stridency, whether I required a model, I told her that I should like to see her in the nude. With a royal gesture she swept apart the folds of a scarlet raincoat. She stood before me quite naked—or nearly so. Over the nipples of her breasts were two tin tomato cans, fastened with a green string about her back. Between the tomato cans hung a very small bird-cage and within it a crestfallen canary. One arm was covered from wrist to shoulder with celluloid curtain rings, which later she admitted to have pilfered from a furniture display in Wanamaker’s. She removed her hat, which had been tastefully but inconspicuously trimmed with gilded carrots, beets and other vegetables. Her hair was close cropped and dyed vermilion. (137)

Although the Baroness “scorned his art,” she and Biddle became, for a time, good friends. While such stories about the Baroness abound, factual information has proved remarkably scarce. Until recently, museum curators, critics and historians knew remarkably little of Elsa’s life prior to her

appearance in New York in the years immediately preceding World War I: they knew only that she had married another German migrant, Leopold Karl Friedrich Baron von Freytag-Loringhoven, in New York prior to WWI, thus becoming a baroness; that neither had much money; that at the outset of war he had crossed the Atlantic to fight for the fatherland but had been interned and subsequently committed suicide; that, penniless, she had found her way to Greenwich Village and eked out a meager existence as an artist's model; that the Baroness's poetry had been championed by *The Little Review*; that she appeared in the one and only issue of the journal *New York Dada*; and that, as Steven Watson notes, "no memoir of the period [would be] complete without some report" of her seemingly perverse dress and her no less perverse behaviour (270). In literary histories and criticism of this period in American art and letters, as in the life writing of the modernists themselves, she survives today primarily as a colorful story, a good anecdote, or simply as spectacle. Everyone, it seems, has a Baroness story to tell.

This fate mirrors, to some extent, the treatment she received from fellow artists in New York. As Robert Reiss pointed out in 1986, "To the proto-Dadaists—recently emigrated to New York City at the century's teens—the Baroness became a sort of mascot of their cultural program, described by her contemporaries variously as 'the mother of Dada' and 'the first surrealist'" (81). Mascots, however, seldom outlive the event or occasion they depict and, as "mascot" for New York Dada, the Baroness proved no exception. According to Reiss, "That Baroness Elsa too often has been no more than a footnote to posthumously constructed accounts of the movement ... tends to thwart a true appreciation of this artist's contributions. The Baroness's output of poetry alone ... is staggering, worth attentive reconsideration today" (85). Reiss's argument for a reassessment of the Baroness appeared in a collection of essays titled *New York Dada* and published in 1986. That volume proved a harbinger of renewed interest in New York Dada itself, in the women who helped shape that movement, and especially in the Baroness. There have been numerous signs of that renewed interest. One was the release in 1994 of Francis M. Naumann's *New York Dada 1915–23*; it included a detailed commentary on the Baroness and numerous reproductions—three in colour—of her artwork. Another was the opening in 1996 of a major exhibition titled *Making Mischief: Dada Invades New York*. The exhibition was curated by Francis Naumann and Beth Venn and held at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art; the catalogue not only featured an essay on the Baroness but took as its cover image her assemblage *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp*.

In the memories, artwork and life writing of modernists involved in the New York scene between 1915 and 1923 ... the Baroness invariably makes an appearance.

Yet another sign of renewed interest was the publication in 1998 of *Women in Dada: Essays on Sex, Gender, and Identity*, a collection of essays edited by Naomi Sawelson-Gorse. Although that volume included essays on the Baroness by Amelia Jones and Rudolf E. Kuenzli, her work is in fact discussed at length by six of the volume's nineteen contributors.

Gammel's biography builds in significant ways on the work of Reiss, Naumann, Jones, Kuenzli and others and is a major contribution to the current resurgence of interest in this much-talked-about but little-known artist. *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada and Everyday Modernity—A Cultural Biography* has at least three significant strengths. First, Gammel is passionate about her subject. In the Introduction she quotes the advice American writer Emily Coleman gave her friend Djuna Barnes when Barnes was struggling in the mid 1930s—and failing—to write the Baroness's biography. "[T]hink of her in as detached a way as you possibly can," Coleman wrote Barnes, "not as a saint or madwoman, but as a woman of genius, alone in the world, frantic" (16–17). Gammel has taken Coleman's advice to heart. Some of the Baroness's contemporaries—the photographer Berenice Abbott, for example—viewed her as a saint; a few, including Anderson, Heap and Coleman, regarded her as a genius; the vast majority, however, thought her disturbingly eccentric or simply mad. In opposition to the dominant view—which still regards her as "one of the most bizarre characters in the whole mad pantheon of Dada" (460 n. 47)—Gammel approaches the Baroness as "a woman of genius" and that approach not only enables a reevaluation of Elsa's avant-garde art and poetry but opens new perspectives on her "lived Dada." In regarding Elsa as a genius, Gammel is ultimately guided less by Emily Coleman than by Djuna Barnes herself. In the Introduction Gammel quotes Barnes' unfinished biography:

Barnes's biographical "Baroness Elsa" fragments provide some sharply incisive pictures of the Baroness through the perspective of a sensitive writer who knew her intimately as a friend. "We of this generation remember her when she was in her late thirties. She was one of the 'characters,' one of the 'terrors' of the district which cuts below Minetta Lane and above eighteenth street to the west," wrote Barnes and continued: "People were afraid of her because she was undismayed about the facts of life—any of them—all of them." (17)

This is not only Barnes's characterization of Elsa but Gammel's as well: both perceive her as a genius who was, in Barnes's words, "strange with beauty"; and both seem haunted by her work. There is, however, nothing

“detached” about Gammel’s representation of the Baroness: for her, the conception of Elsa as a genius is not an hypothesis but an article of faith. While this belief clouds her judgment at times, the passion and conviction she brings to the biography is unquestionably a strength.

A second, related strength of *Baroness Elsa* lies in the research. Passion is at work here too. The biography brings order and understanding to Elsa’s seemingly chaotic and reckless life and Gammel adds a wealth of new information (from repositories large and small) to the biographical record. She establishes, for example, that Elsa married her second husband, the German translator and writer Felix Paul Greve, “on 22 August 1907 in a civil ceremony in Berlin-Wilmersdorf, as confirmed by the Standesamt Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf, on 9 October 2001”(144). In a footnote Gammel thanks for this information Gisela Baronin Freytag v. Loringhoven, a descendant of the Baroness’s and herself an art historian engaged in a study of Elsa’s work. (An “Afterword” by Gisela Baronin Freytag v. Loringhoven is included in Gammel’s biography.) Elsewhere Gammel acknowledges help she received not only from archivists, librarians and curators but from virtually every known Baroness scholar and *aficionado*. If one of Gammel’s strengths as a researcher is her passion, another lies in her conception of scholarship as a collaborative undertaking and in her ability to build partnerships with others. One sign of that collaboration is her ability to include in the biography reproductions—seven in colour—of the full range of Elsa’s work in the visual arts—much of it in private collections—and a selection of work by artists who employed the Baroness as a model. Another sign of collaboration is that Gammel fully documents her sources—as in the record of marriage cited above—leaving a clear trail for others. Not surprisingly, then, *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada and Everyday Modernity—A Cultural Biography* includes just under one hundred pages of notes rich in detail and argument, a bibliography that runs to over thirty pages, and a detailed chronology. There is a wealth of material here upon which others can build.

Another strength of *Baroness Elsa* is that Gammel offers a clear and provocative interpretation of the Baroness. Readers may not agree with her representation of the Baroness as an early-twentieth century proto-performance artist or as a proto-feminist battling for gender equality or as a literary genius whose innovations and talent rival James Joyce’s—with whom Heap and others compared her—but there is certainly nothing half-hearted or equivocal about either Gammel’s portrait of the Baroness or the claims made on her behalf. Given the earlier tendency to dismiss Elsa’s poetry and artwork out of hand, these claims were perhaps predictable

Readers may not agree with her representation of the Baroness ... but there is certainly nothing half-hearted or equivocal about either Gammel’s portrait of the Baroness or the claims made on her behalf.

and function as a corrective. Gammel divides the Baroness's life into four parts: Part I examines Elsa's childhood in Germany; Part II, her participation in avant-garde circles in Munich and Berlin, and her early training as an actress, poet and artist; Part III, her years in the United States; and Part IV, the final years in Berlin and Paris. Although Elsa participated in intellectual movements on both sides of the Atlantic, she really came into her own as an poet and artist during her years in New York. These years certainly form the heart of Gammel's book and are likely to remain central to any future biography. Not surprisingly, it is in this section that Gammel makes her most significant, and extravagant, claims for the Baroness. Concerning Elsa's years in America, Gammel writes:

Among New York's avant-garde she was a daringly original artist, a crusader for beauty, as well as a catalyst and an agent provocateur in a crucial period of cultural transfer and coming of age of American art. As urban flâneur, androgynous New Woman, crazed sexual dynamo, and fierce enemy of bourgeois convention, the thirty-nine-year-old ... confronted America with a *lived* dada that preceded the first dada experimentations in Zurich's Spiegelgasse. In the modernist war against Victorianism, she combined an original style of peripatetic bluntness, poetic intensity and angry confrontation. She ultimately forced young Americans—among them William Carlos Williams, Djuna Barnes, Margaret Anderson, Hart Crane, Berenice Abbott, Ezra Pound, Jane Heap, and Maxwell Bodenheim—to redraw the boundaries of modernity, while she offered America her gift of intensely charged poetry, visual art, and performance art. (160)

This passage is taken from the opening pages of Part III; the claims it contains serve merely as a prelude to many, more specific claims in this section of the book. The key term in this passage is "catalyst": later in this section, Gammel states that in Part III she intends "to make a case for the Baroness's function as catalyst"; specifically, she argues that Elsa "brought the spark of Munich's highly eroticized avant-garde" to New York (175). I do not have the space here to take up Gammel's arguments. One simple point will need to suffice. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, a catalyst is "one that precipitates a process or event, especially without being involved in or changed by the consequences." If the Baroness precipitated a series of changes in the New York art scene, she was also profoundly affected by them; therein lies at once the achievement of her art, the deeply moving tragedy of her life story, and the continued inter-

est in her work. Writing in *The Little Review* in the spring of 1922, Jane Heap proclaimed that the Baroness, a German immigrant, was “the first American dada” and declared: “she is the only one living anywhere who dresses dada, loves dada, lives dada” (46). In Gammel’s biography we learn not only what prepared Elsa to serve as the embodiment of dada but the high price she paid for playing that part.

The weaknesses of *Baroness Elsa* are a function of its strengths. The passion Gammel brings to Elsa’s life story sometimes leads to reductive analysis. The Baroness was a complex personality: she was an uncompromisingly radical artist who was herself deeply troubled; and a woman who mediated between cultures but who struggled to move across borders and between cultures. At her best, Gammel succeeds in animating her subject, in conveying Elsa’s many complexities, and in doing justice to the available evidence; at times, however, she is too intent on advancing an argument to acknowledge just how thin the available evidence is. Despite Gammel’s considerable success in documenting the Baroness’s life, there are still significant gaps in the record—gaps in our knowledge of Elsa’s early life in Germany, her first years in North America, and her final years. To fill these gaps, Gammel leans far too heavily on questionable sources, most notably two novels, *Fanny Essler* (1905) and *Mauermesiter Ihles Haus* (1906), published by Elsa’s second husband, the German translator and author Felix Paul Greve. On the basis of Elsa’s claim, in the mid 1920s, that the two novels were, in content, dictated by her, some scholars, including Gammel, have treated the novels as collaborations or simply claimed them as effectively more her work than his. This is, at best, questionable scholarship: Elsa never claimed to have written the books; she only claimed they were based on her life story. Even if she herself were the sole author of these texts, they would provide questionable evidence for biography. Gammel too often inclines not only to treat them as Elsa’s texts but to grant them far too much authority as biographical documents. An even more questionable instance of this occurs midway through *Baroness Elsa* when Gammel uses Greve’s Canadian novel, *Settlers of the Marsh*, published in 1925, well over a decade following the separation of Elsa and Felix, as “a window into Elsa’s bizarre life” during the year they spent together in Kentucky (148). In these instances, Gammel quite literally equates Elsa and Felix with fictional characters from Greve’s novel. Although some critics have speculated that in *Settlers* Greve, now Grove, works through his relation to Elsa, there is little evidence to support that assumption; it is simply speculation. And, if we were to make that leap, what does Grove’s “working through” of these events more than a decade later—a “working

Biography depends on the “sifting” and interpretation of evidence. That evidence is usually remarkably varied but in *Baroness Elsa* it is more varied than usual.

through” mediated by a work of fiction—tell us about Elsa’s experience of that event?

Biography depends on the “sifting” and interpretation of evidence. That evidence is usually remarkably varied but in *Baroness Elsa* it is more varied than usual: Elsa’s activities were wide-ranging and her biographer has, quite appropriately, cast her own net widely. If one of Gammel’s tasks is to tell Elsa’s life story as fully and as engagingly as she can, another is to indicate clearly the nature of the evidence available to her and to sift that evidence as carefully as possible. In telling Elsa’s story, Gammel fails to address a serious methodological problem her biography poses. Gammel’s central claim—building on the work of Amelia Jones—is that the Baroness was a proto-feminist, proto-performance artist who quite literally took dada to the street. According to Gammel, Elsa’s “kinesthetic body art” constitutes what Jones terms “performative dada.” Arguing that “Dada’s goal ... is a systematic decolonizing of the everyday, a classical deautomatizing of the public in the quotidian moment,” Gammel writes:

Thus conceived, the Baroness’s dada was an important cultural response to modern urban mass production and technological progress. Her dada created *spontaneous moments of living* performed in the city for a random city viewership, her beauty designed to change the familiar present moment by charging it with emotional dizziness and laughter. The Baroness’s body art told a story of perpetual movement. Her bracelets and elongated earring jewels rhythmically swung from her body.... The companion animals, including dogs and canaries, that regularly participated in her promenades further accentuated the image of her body as a gyrating life force. Confronting her viewers with her ready-made formula—*motion, emotion*—her proudly strutting body critically engaged the modern machine age and critically countered the male dadaists’ fetishizing of modern technology. (187–9; italics in original)

The problem here, as earlier, is evidence: on what does Gammel base her arguments concerning Elsa’s “performative dada”?

Gammel herself indirectly raises the issue when she cites performance theorist Peggy Phelan: “Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations; once it does, it becomes something other than performance” (190). If “performance in an ontological sense is strictly nonreproductive” (190), then what access does the Baroness’s biographer have to Elsa’s “performative dada”? Gammel argues that, “Since the Baroness’s

art could not be stored, its memory was literally ingested and assimilated by her viewers, who effectively *consumed* the dramatic flash of her art and were thus able to call it up decades later (191). Those who would study the Baroness's "performative dada," in fact, have very little to go on: apart from Elsa's correspondence, which is usually preoccupied with other things, and her autobiography, which stops well short of the New York period, there is virtually nothing: no essays (published or unpublished) that focus on her performances, no diaries, no statements of any kind. Apart from a few scattered comments in the letters and autobiography, the most significant surviving record exists in the memoirs of the Baroness's contemporaries, some of which were written decades after the events in question. George Biddle's account of Elsa's appearance in his Philadelphia studio was published twenty years after the event. Recounting this incident in *Baroness Elsa*, Gammel declares: "The Baroness's body is saturated with signifiers that cry out to be read as gender acts" (202). But how is one to read those signifiers when we have so little to go on? How can we interpret? Why was she in Philadelphia? Why did the Baroness choose to seek employment at Biddle's studio? What did she know about him? Can we relate this "performance" to other "performances" in Philadelphia? In New York and elsewhere? How do they change? Do they develop in recognizable ways? What can we say about the critique they offer? "From the early teens to the early twenties," Gammel writes, "Freytag-Loringhoven's bodily bricolage presents an ingenious dada that can now be recovered in brilliantly colorful stories from the margins of cultural history" (197). Recovered how? The Baroness's biographer has little more than the colourful anecdotes of Elsa's contemporaries and that places significant limits on what can be known.

In writing *Baroness Elsa* Gammel demonstrates a willingness to take risks and be provocative. Given that willingness, it is not surprising that her reach sometimes exceeds her grasp; what is surprising, perhaps, is just how much she accomplishes here. The story she tells is compelling; the biographical information she makes available will shape studies of the Baroness for years to come; and the arguments she advances will put others on their mettle. The book itself is beautifully designed and generously illustrated. Undoubtedly the colourful stories about the Baroness will continue to circulate; undoubtedly, too, many students of modernism will continue to regard her as the mascot of New York Dada, but Gammel clearly demonstrates that Elsa's poetry and artwork reward careful study.

Works Cited

- Biddle, George. *An American Artist's Story*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939.
- H[eap], J[ane]. "Dada." *The Little Review* 8.2 (1922): 46.
- Hjartarson, Paul, and Tracy Kulba. "Borne Across the World': Else Plötz (Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven), Felix Paul Greve (Frederick Philip Grove) and the Politics of Cultural Mediation." *The Politics of Cultural Mediation: Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Felix Paul Greve*. Eds. Paul Hjartarson and Tracy Kulba. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2003. xix–xxxv.
- Naumann, Francis M. *New York Dada 1915–23*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1994.
- Reiss, Robert. "My Baroness': Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven." *New York Dada*. Ed. Rudolf E. Kuenzli. New York: Willis Locker & Owens, 1986. 81–101.
- Rodker, John. "'Dada' and the Baroness Else von Freytag-Loringhoven." *The Little Review* 7.2 (1920): 33–6.
- Watson, Steven. *Strange Bedfellows: The First American Avant-Garde*. New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1991.