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# JAMES JOYCE BROADSHEET

## INSPIRED BY ULYSSES

by Richard Brown

Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo (eds) *Body Sweats: The Uncensored Writings of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven*

London & Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press 2011 418pp

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THE CONTRIBUTION of Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (1874 – 1927) to the New York modernist avant-garde included poetry, plastic art and body performance. She lived out to an unusual degree the bold claim printed on the cover of *The Little Review*, where much of her work appeared, that the magazine was ‘MAKING NO COMPROMISE WITH THE PUBLIC TASTE’. In bringing different elements of her work together in this single volume, Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo provide a fuller impression of the range and impact of her work than has been available before, including 150 poems edited here for the first time, several of which speak to Joyce.

Amongst her modernist literary contemporaries, Djuna Barnes was von Freytag’s closest friend and supporter and wrote her obituary in *transition* 1928. She had been one of her models for the character of Robin Vote in *Nightwood*, if not necessarily the only one. Phillip Herring’s biography of Barnes (*Djuna*, 1995) gives an informative thumbnail of various of the Baroness’s connections, including her ill-fated relationship with Felix Paul Greve who wrote early novels such as *Fanny Essler* (1905) which also drew on her life. Ezra Pound acknowledged her courage in *Canto 95*, welcoming her as a Cassandra of the developing future arts:

Elsa Cassandra, ‘the Baroness’

Von Freytag etc. sd/several true things  
in the old days

### glass architecture

AS A FIGURE of the New York avant-garde art world of the 1920s which was embodied in the Armories show of 1913, von Freytag was a symbolic and, for some, an exemplary figure, celebrated by Marcel Duchamp in the memorable tribute quoted here from Robert Rexroth’s *American Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (1977):

She is not a Futurist. She is the future.

The dialogue with Duchamp was enthusiastically pursued from her side in the form of her work. Her ‘Love-Chemical Relationship’ (1918), framed as a dialogue between ‘Un Enfant Français: Marcel (a Futurist)’ and ‘Ein Deutsches Kind: Else (a Future Futurist)’, has Duchamp’s large glass as its underlying symbolic motif: ‘Thereafter thou becamest like glass.’ At the start of the century, glass had, in the work of Paul Scheerbarth and Bruno Taut, a powerfully utopian charge, (noted by Walter Benjamin at the start of the *Arcades Project*), inaugurating a new glass culture and a transformed mankind. Von Freytag’s poem envisages a future in which she and Duchamp and their relationship is imaged as a process of becoming glass:

I myself will become glass and everything  
around me glassy.



Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, ‘Portrait of Marcel Duchamp’, 1919. Collage, pastel on board (31 X 46 cm).

However, unlike for Scheerbarth and Taut, bodily forms are retained in this ethereal, abstracted future. ‘Mars’ is one of von Freytag’s several witty cryptic pet names for Duchamp (along with ‘meticulous’ and ‘Marcel Dushit’) echoed in the dialogue poem ‘Aphrodite to Mars’ (c.1921–2). The name encapsulates the bodily obsession of her art and nods to his own well-known cryptic alter-ego name, ‘Rose Salevy’. Her stark poem-exclamation:

Marcel, Marcel, I Love You Like Hell, Marcel  
speaks for itself.

For readers of Joyce, it may be a shock to register that her ‘Love-Chemical Relationship’ appeared in the same issue of the *Little Review* as the ‘Calypso’ instalment of *Ulysses* in June 1918. But this is to open a window to aspects of the avant-garde first-world-war culture which welcomed them both. Duchamp’s ready-made ‘Fountain’ remains one of the Armories’ most potent symbols and ‘Calypso’, in its faithful depiction of Leopold Bloom’s morning visit to the outhouse, from which even Pound had at first demurred, was itself uncompromising in its address to taste. It may be instructive to observe that contemporary postmodern hotels now quite routinely feature glass walls for their ensuite bathroom facilities.

### shameless engineer

OF GREAT INTEREST to Joyceans is von Freytag’s poem “‘The Modest Woman’” (1920). It emerged out of the *Little Review* defence of *Ulysses* mounted by Jane Heap, Margaret Anderson and, as Richard Ellmann put it, ‘several hundred Greenwich Villagers’ who came to their support. ‘Artists are aristocrats’ it begins, in imperious Yeatsian style, continuing:

Artists who call themselves artists – not  
aristocrats – are plain working people, mixing  
up art with craft, in vulgar untrained brain.

Who wants us to hide our joys (Joyce?)

If I can eat I can eliminate – it is logic – it is  
why I eat!

My machinery is built that way. Yours also –  
though you do not like to think of – mention  
it – because you are not aristocrat.

Joyce’s lack of shame is even more to be thought  
of as that of an engineer:

Your skirts are too long – out of ‘modesty,’ not  
decoration – when you lift them you do not do  
it elegantly – proudly.

Why should I – proud engineer – be ashamed  
of my machinery – part of it?

Is there any engineer of steel machinery who is?  
Unless he runs ramshackle one?

The stronger she works – the prouder he is!

Has he no right to talk shop? He, not you! for  
you are no engineer! Helpless victim – pulled  
over gravel – dust – by that indecent machine  
– your body – over life’s glorious wilderness –  
not seeing landscape! Joyce’s is engineer! one of  
the boldest – most adventurous – globetrotter  
– ! to talk shop is his sacred business – we want  
him to – to love engine that carries him through  
flashing glades to his grave – his glorious estate.

She recommends relating to Joyce as a disciple:

In such public – we dance.

That attitude of the learner – the inferior – you  
should feel in regard to James Joyce.

The remarkably outspoken and performative  
poem ultimately returns to Joyce, aggressively  
responding to the suggestion of the judges that the  
women editors would not have understood what  
they had printed, with a pretence of illiteracy, and  
mounting an ecstatic celebration of his genius that  
owes something to the poetic prose climaxes of *A  
Portrait of the Artist* whilst radically repurposing the  
poetic syntax of Emily Dickinson:

I have not read ‘Ulysses’. As story it seems  
impossible – to James Joyce’s style I am not yet  
quite developed enough – makes me difficulty –  
too intent on my own creation – no time now.

Sometime I will read him – have no doubt –  
time of screams – delights – dances – soul and  
body – as with Shakespeare.

For snatches I have had show me it is more  
worthwhile than many a smooth coherent story  
by author or real genuine prominence.

The way he slings ‘obscenities’ – handles them  
– never forced – never obscene – vulgar! (thank  
Europe for such people – world will advance.)

Shows him one of highest intellects – with  
creative power abundant – soaring!

In fact – his obscenities – until now – are only  
thing I could taste – enjoy – with abandon –  
his blasphemies. Pure soul of child – wisdom of  
age – genius.

Politically correct, whether to her own age  
or to ours, von Freytag is not. However, her  
transgressions of the boundaries of artistic idiom  
as well as decorum, especially her re-articulation  
of the human in relation to its bodily and  
machinic dimensions, continues to make her one  
of our contemporaries. Her celebration of the  
genius of Joyce’s ‘epic of the body’, here posed  
in outrage to a conservative, middle-class, North  
American audience but equally resonant for so  
many other audiences then and now, evidences  
the shameless artistic ambition of the Twenties  
of the last century and still seems ahead of its time  
for the Twenty Twenties.

### kindly spoke

‘KINDLY’, ‘(inspired by J.J.’s *Ulysses*)’,  
engages further with the furor, as  
most of the directly Joyce-inspired  
work collected here. It celebrates  
Joyce’s shamelessness in its bodily subject matter  
and its satiric provision for the potentially  
offending word ‘fart’ to be reproduced by ‘f –  
’ with the mock note ‘\* As it can be printed should  
there arise any objection to candidness.’ The poem  
perhaps responds to the ‘Sirens’ episode which  
was serialised in *The Little Review* (Aug–Sep 1919)  
without any objection, despite so graphically  
depicting the musical development of Bloom’s

flatulence at the end of the episode. It also looks  
forward to Molly’s thoughts on the subject in  
‘Penelope’ perhaps even inspiring the flavour in  
which Joyce presented them.

And God spoke kindly to mine heart –

So kindly spoke He to mine heart –

He said: ‘Thou art allowed to fart – (f–) \*

So kindly spoke He to mine heart.

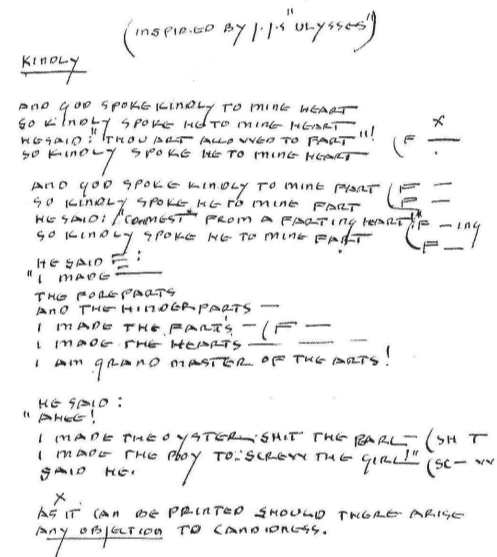
And God spoke kindly to mine fart – (f–)

So kindly spoke he to mine fart – (f–)

He said: ‘Comest from a farting heart!’ (f–ing)

So kindly spoke He to mine fart.’ (f–)

Here, as elsewhere, Gammel and Zelazo  
reproduce a reading text of the poem alongside  
a facsimile of its original manuscript form,  
which is necessary in order to reveal this graphic  
dimension of her work. The reading text uses  
lower case, though von Freytag’s handwritten  
text itself is mostly all in capital letters, defining  
its visual impact and tone, seeming egalitarian in  
preventing the capitalisation of proper names.



(*Body Sweats*, page 87)

Based in New York, von Freytag did not have  
the same opportunities as Barnes or Mina Loy to  
encounter Joyce in person until she finally made  
it to Paris in 1926, shortly before her suicide on  
14 December 1927. At that point, Joyce himself  
was relatively settled in his Square Robiac flat and  
hard at work, busy maintaining his relationship  
with Harriet Shaw Weaver, who had paid for  
it. Her loyalty to him was unquestioned but her  
enthusiasm for *Work in Progress* needed support.  
In *Nora*, Brenda Maddox writes that ‘there were  
many parties at the Square Robiac’ and she  
describes Nora’s friendship with Barnes. Lucia’s  
career as a modernistic dancer was still showing  
great promise and even Joyce himself known  
to dance to entertain guests. From 1927 Barnes  
herself had a larger apartment at rue Vaneau  
with her partner Thelma Wood but whether or  
not a meeting took place between von Freytag and  
Joyce at which she could express her devotion in  
person is not known. In 1928 *transition* published  
the Baroness’s obituary alongside edited selections  
of her letters and of ‘Anna Livia Plurabelle’. Her  
poems were not deposited in the University of  
Maryland until 1975.

Though Pound protested that she was not  
included in the Penguin Book of Poetry, it may  
not be for her poetic achievement alone that she is  
best remembered so much as in an extraordinary  
intervention across the arts, including body  
performance, in which gender and sexuality are  
at the fore. In her, the intense bohemian avant-  
gardism of the times becomes its own memorial.  
We glimpse our present in its imagined future of  
culture, art, materials, dance and performance, as  
well as in words. Her relationship with Duchamp  
helps us to see further links between Joyce and  
his work. Joyce’s own place in that story may not  
be straightforward but it is a fundamental one  
to his shaping and subsequent reputation which  
will need to be repeatedly revisited as cultural  
perspectives change in our time and in the future.  
In readjusting the focus and piecing together  
another part of the picture, *Body Sweats* helps that  
process to take place.