

Guillaume Apollinaire

The Poet Who has Exerted a Manifold Influence in the Development of Contemporaneous French Letters

By PAUL ROSENFELD

GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE was a playboy of letters in tramway'd electric Paris. In the monster mechanical town of wireless and elevators and nitrogen lamps and placarded walls about the couchant Louvre, he made for himself a coloured, poet's existence. He was not one of those modern writers who live their literature only in the withdrawn chamber, and go over vibrant asphalt and by corners and crowds and posters praying that the world leave them undisturbed in their otium. Apollinaire played with the constituents of life, with people, with things, with ideas, as other poets know only how to toss and catch again images and words. Somewhat as was Villon's in fifteenth century Lutetia, this stoutish young Pole's singing was portion of a larger business, leafage grown upon the bole of a tree. His was a sort of effervescent lyricism which poured itself in many forms, invading with a jovial exuberance the most banal manifestations of life. The casual business of the day, the fragments of intercourse, got from him some of the rhythm and glint which many outhors strike out of their medium only.

"Le flaneur des deux rives"

FOR the Apollinaire who stepped off a street-train or opened a glass café-door or ate raviolis or walked down a street in the Auteuil, was the selfsame who sat before a writing table moulding words into poems and spinning fanciful and witty tales. He was a magician in talk, enchanting folk with his stories and fabrications in the café-corner or in the living-room. In the trenches, under the falling projectiles, he told tales, and got himself with the soldiers of his corps a reputation of entertainer like that he sported in art-radical Paris. A letter to a friend, begun in playful prose, would suddenly under his hand lift into a poem: oftentimes, a very finely articulated piece of verse. Like Mallarmé, but with greater spontaneity, he sent poems on post cards, in *petits bleus*, as dispatches. He was erudite, and he made his erudition play lightly along, and add a spice to the dish of life. He was, indeed, a figure, a vivid and distinguished personality, a somebody on the street, not only because he wrote books. And the man repeated Villon not alone in this living of a poesy midmost and in the swirl of the town. True, Apollinaire did not, we suppose, filch the wallets of the burghers to whose daughters he proposed love. He sat more often with cubists than with cutpurses. But, in the end, his destiny put him, too, into a ditch not much different from that in which the bird of the bitter bright gray morn lost teeth and hair. And, reformed from the trenches, like Villon let out of his dungeon, he survived not very long, and died, a few days before the armistice.

It was no long hair and velveteen coat, no *vie de Bohême* and picturesque untidiness of Montmartre that Apollinaire needed to make this rich existence for himself. Nor did he require, as requires d'Annunzio, so that life will flame about him, Renaissance magnificence, lordly quinquecento houses, horses, hounds and airplanes, Greek Nikes extending

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over the foot of luxurious beds the conqueror's bays, orations to the populace upon the Capitoline. He kept the gemlike lights playing on the ordinary house-walls; in the ordinary lounge clothes and a bright tie or two; from the ordinary paths of civilization. There was set, in the rim of his straw katy and of his soldier's cap, the stone that Tytyl had in his bonnet. It turned of itself continuously; and in the stones of Paris, and in the jumbled world there was an illimitable amount of objects exciting to the imagination. Everywhere were things that kept the ticker of his mind busily jutting out more and more of its white purple-printed tape. Everything seemed to impel it to move; interest in his own sensations led to orientation on cubism; cubism led to investigation of more accurate means of representation; these speculations led back again to his own breast and made him hear the whirring of his own nerves more distinctly. All sorts of different objects shot illuminations onto each other. The dresses, boas and hats in a milliner's window could make this man ponder on the shrinking rôle of the poet in modern life. An airplane rising through cloudlands might evoke a childish dream of Christ ascending bannered through the blue. A cravat binding the neck might call to mind the habits of thought which choke modern life; an Ingersoll might make him perceive the round of the hours of his own life; five o'clock and the poetry of the hour when the tea is poured and the taxi stops before the doorway down below.

Gusto

THERE were a thousand curious things in books; in the books that were hidden away in the department of the National Library called the Hell; in books dealing with the religion and history of the Mormons; in all the strange bound and printed caviar and olives and oysters. There were for Apollinaire many strange and noteworthy things in Paris; odd corners and odd persons that were pleasant to see; a chemical landscape to be glimpsed from this friend's windows; a witty old man to be met in this tiny bookshop on the left bank among expensively bound pornographies; a good dinner to be eaten in the cellar of such and such a picture dealer's shop, beneath Cézannes, with no gravy of art-talk; a new art of touch to be dreamt about and written lightly of; a certain café on the boulevard to be visited where there were still boulevardiers of the classic cut. And there were a thousand pleasures to be procured. There was the pleasure of delicious dishes of food; and Apollinaire knew where to find them or how to make them himself; he was Epicurus' own son, and his wife was assistant cook, only, in their apartment. There was the pleasure of a long fight for the appreciation of the art of the cubists; the friends of Wagner had not waged the only glorious battle for an art; there were others as glorious to be fought. And there were other pleasures to be had, or if there were no others, there were some to be invented by clever men. Did he not write.

*Et puis, je ne crains pas la mort,
Mais bien l'emmerdement, c'est pire.*

The marvellous pervasive gusto, the capacity to extract pleasure from many unsuspected veins, became of course, the capacity for returning it again into the world. So Apollinaire was a sort of fluid and ambulant work of art. The day must have been shot with brilliant beams, and the earth many vista'd and wide by the side of this charming horseman of life. Men must have heard in the rhythm of his words the sound of their own inner voices, quite as in a play or poem. Men certainly caught gusto from him as combustible objects

catch fire from each other. Certainly, vast numbers of the ideas which folk in Paris, and folk come here from Paris, quite innocently sport as their very own, were cast upon the world first from Apollinaire's mouth. Words which he spoke earnestly and words which he merely tossed cheekily about like gay painted balls were swallowed alike.

The Creator of Dada?

WHO can say how much of the mind of the most abandoned and reckless dada is a creation of Guillaume Kostrowitsky's? Certainly, the "surrealism" into which dadaism today is turning, was a fancy of the Pole's sketchily outlined in his farce *Les mamelles de Tiresia's*. And, certainly, the interchange of thought which set up between Apollinaire and Picasso and Picabia and Laurencin and the rest of the revolutionary painters, an interchange partly literary, mostly oral, was of greatest worth to cubists and critic alike. In making clear to himself his own relation to the canvases of the experimenters, and in ascertaining the principles of his comprehension of them, the writer helped erect the philosophical superstructure on these more lyrical and emotionally textured intelligences; and revealed the direction of the workers to themselves. Like an Adam in a latter-day Eden, he gave names to the entire animal kingdom, defined scientific cubism from orphism, even foretold with great accuracy the route which various of the painters have since traversed. He seemed able to smell the coming wind from afar; it remains a fact that some time after Apollinaire wrote a fantastic sketch of a new art of touch, an art intended directly for the palm and fingers, Miss Clifford Williams, quite independently, exhibited here in New York a sculpture of an octopus vine intended primarily for handling. And about him folk a little parched gathered to quaff a drink of pleasure or two. In his last year, when he transported about Paris a poetical and military glory, a wounded skull and a body some too tightly draped in a spiffy new uniform, he had a sort of court, a train in which neither purple-necked ladies nor cultural bounders, poets or eunuchs, experimenters in the arts and pseudo-people, were entirely unrepresented. For them he did his verbal miracles, and made his feast of—*petits pains*. Time must indeed have moved very languidly for many folk after the dreary day when Apollinaire fell victim to the black flue of 1918.

One feels it circulating through his literature, the strange charming magic of mind with its chimerical fantasy and delicate wit and power of illuminating all sorts of doubtful matters. It is as a magician shaking out of a high hat cool and luminous pieces of silk that one perceives the poet of *Alcools*. The poems are many in mood, many in type, recalling a little in *Rhénanes*, Heine; the Verlaine of *Fêtes Gallantes*, in *Crépuscule*; the earlier Mallarmé in *Le Vent Nocturne* and *Clair de Lune*. All have a light, gracious brilliance; they are the work of a man whose hand was fortunate, to whose fingers all sorts of materials responded, and who seems to have done everything with a smiling ease, an infantile self-satisfaction at his own ability to do a lovely trick and compose a silken fantasy of words. One feels the conjurer, too, in the more capricious portions of his prose; the wild and absurd excursions of fancy in *Le poète assassiné* and *La femme assise*, with their marvellous descriptions of impossible robes, made of feathers, mirrors, live birds; of impossible machines for suppressing time; of impossible religious crowd-ecstasies and impossible banquets and

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ceremonies among the Mormons. Apollinaire has chosen as his device the words *J'émerveille*; and enchant he did; and not merely with fantastic descriptions. There is the most delicious of flavours in his descriptions of the *bohème* in the Montparnasse district before the war, made in the course of *La femme assise*. All the nostalgia for the old ways and the café de la Rotonde which must have assailed poor Apollinaire in the trenches is squeezed into those bright pages with their description of the costumes of the DeLaunay pair at Bullier; into the description of the talk of the *debardeurs* at the opera ball; into the sly notes on the "*cette vie qu' animaient l'art, l'amour, la danse à Bullier et le cinéma*", scattered through all the amazing and dislocated prose. Remarks about a street in Auteuil, about public libraries seen in various cities, Petrograd, Neuchatel, New York, about the origin of certain superstitions among soldiers, quite dryly made, nevertheless thrill one as a story might. And styles are juggled, three or four in *La femme assise*; and drunken ribald comments passed, in *Le poète assassiné*, on the state of the arts in the years before the war; scenes of drinking and eating and wenching set down with light and Rabelaisian gusto; a whole showcase of surprising and merry things.

"Calligrammes"

OF his literary inventions, however, calligrammatic poetry reveals best the man's awakened state to the materials in his environment, his own researchful and experimental attitude on life. In this form, Apollinaire was attempting to make the medium of print itself become part of the communication of the written word. From everything in the world he got sensations; from the blocks of print in books and newspapers, too; and it suddenly had come to him that the spaces on the page, the black and white of letters and paper, might be made expressive, also. The verbal image is notoriously a feeble one. The poet is under a handicap when competing with painter or musician in the rendering of a sensation; for he has to rely largely on memory, which is pale; the clang of words themselves is not strong; while painter and musician act directly and freshly on the retina and the ear-drum. So Apollinaire decided to assist the verbal image by one actually pictured by the array of print. *Anch'io son pittore* was the cry; he began composing these sorts of halfpoems, half pictures. A poem about rain was printed to represent the long streaks of rain-water pouring down the sky to earth; a poem about a watch represented a watch; one about a cravat was arranged as a picture of a neck-tie. Of course, the idea did not originate with Apollinaire. If one turns over a volume of the poems of old George Herbert, one will find certain of the ritualistic pieces, *The Table* for example, printed as "calligrammes". Baroque age always calls to baroque age. And Mallarmé, in *Le coup de dés*, was tinkering with the space left by the printed words, striving to use them constructively. Nor was Apollinaire entirely successful in his experiment. There is no doubt that the difficulty of reading

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the words arranged in zigzags and spirals takes away a great deal of the pleasure given by the form. Apollinaire, too, seemed to realize that only certain poems lent themselves to the calligramme; he himself to the end composed lyrics in regular and in free verse, as well as in the semi-pictorial form. Still, the idea has been adopted by other poets, Cocteau and Blaise Cendrars; and there is no doubt the next decades will see literature making increased use of the ready ally indicated to it by Apollinaire.

The Expression of a Time

IT was the café-life of Paris that assisted this charming existence by supplying a soil nourishing to it. There is always something of a public life in progress in the artistic tribe there. The Parisian moves in groups. Every new phase of art during the last century has been a group-expression: romanticism, naturalism, symbolism, impressionism, cubism, dadaism. Points of view, world-visions, are developed there quite vividly by intercourse; the self-distrust of the workers in New York, the jealousy, the preoccupation with the question of "greatness", does not exist there sufficiently virulently to make stimulating interchange a rarity. And it was easier for Apollinaire to make an art of life for himself in such an atmosphere, to develop his gift for intercourse to the verge of genius, than it would have been in one where no terrain lay inviting. And yet, a man of Apollinaire's cast would have lived his life in any environment much as he lived it there; France, after all, was only his country by adoption. He was born of Polish parents in Monaco and baptized in Rome; his father, it is said, being a high dignitary of the church. Had he been born in New York instead, he would, one is sure, have discovered myriad ways of amusing himself in this heavy place, have found spots to eat and drink and laugh and talk and see and dream; have invented about him a really gay and spiritual city, and still made poems and written mad tales. Certainly, the trenches did not make him less a poet. He managed to do brilliant lyrics while in training. He remained the poet in the trenches unostentatiously. He even managed to print or hectograph a booklet of "calligrammes" on the fighting line: on the title-page of *Case d'Armons* we read "*La 1re édition, à 25 exemplaires, a été polygraphiée sur papier quadrillé, à l'encre violette, au moyen de gellatine, à la batterie de tir, 145me batterie, 38me Régiment d'artillerie de campagne, devant l'ennemi, et le tirage a été achevé-le 17 juin 1915.*"

For Apollinaire possessed the perfect adjustability of the born poet. He would have found himself much at home in any environment into which he would have been born. whether it would have been one of pampas and herds and lonely hamlets, or one of concrete, newspapers, war and steel. He would have synchronized with any vital rhythm whether the time had been spacious, calm and slow, or, as was that of Paris of the age of the war, hectic, weary and shrill. For in any age and in any spot he would have quite simply

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accepted the thing here; have shaped for himself an expressive, interpretative function. In any place, in Athens or New York, in jail or in a Ceylonese jungle, he would in some fashion have succeeded in making himself an integral portion of the thing that was moving; have pierced, with the aid of imagination, the local crust and reached through it the universal. Whatever was about him, quinquereemes or telephones or bars, would in some way have been made to serve his purpose, to provide him objects through which he might feel and think, to satisfy the inborn need for harmony. No preconception of what the poet's life should be; no particular worry whether what he was doing in his day was at all related and commensurable with what Isaiah had done in his, or Greco or Cézanne or Beethoven in theirs, would have stopped him and hampered him and made him change his mind. What he would have absorbed from books and what he would have absorbed from personal intercourse would have interplayed and become active, would have become much as they are in Apollinaire's fanciful prose. What he would have been and what he would have done would have taken on the timbre of an age, and been different from the stuffs made in any other time. But they would also have spoken to all other times, and revealed, no matter how slight their weight, to some degree, times to each other and to themselves.

And Apollinaire will speak his own hectic, shattered time to curious men. Somehow, despite their slightness, his writings are vibrant with the rhythm of the years before the war and the war-years themselves; they are like clothes that retain the aroma of cigars long since burnt to ashes. The man gave the best of himself, perhaps, in his talk; there appears, also, to have been an Apollinaire who never quite got himself expressed on paper, and whom none but a few persons knew. Much of his writing was hackwork; *La fin de Babylon*, for example, was done for an editor who had some illustrations he was eager to use, and needed a text. And yet, even fairly negligently composed work of his is informed, somehow, with the mercuriality of his mind; his writings were really by-products of his life, and therefore breathe. And other times will see again in bits of Apollinaire's the state of mind of literary men in a day which seemed unneedful of them, and found in the men of science their priests. Or, they will trace in the really beautiful war-poems of *Calligrammes* the states of mind of the soldiers who went eyes open into the battle: first, the chivalresque attitude—

*J'en ai pris mon parti, Rouveyre
Et monté sur mon grand cheval
Je vais bientôt partir en guerre
Sans pitié chaste et l'oeil sévère
Comme ces guerriers qu'Epinal*

*Vendait Images populaires
Que Georquin gravait dans les bois
Ou sont-ils ce beaux militaires
Soldats passés Où sont les guerres
Ou sont les guerres d'autrefois.*

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then, the years of

*Ulysse que de jours pour rentrer dans
Ithaque!*

last, the complete pyrrhonism of *La Femme Assise*, the state of mind of those who have acquiesced in a hated task and found themselves believing in consequence that nothing is of any importance, that all facts are equally trivial and unrelated, and nothing worth a moment of intensity. And, no doubt, at moments there will come to every reader the glamour of a life of letters enormously enjoyed, a life of letters danced rather more than mourned through. There will define itself for a moment again the stout radiant figure of Guillaume Apollinaire as he was when he flaunted the banner of cubism, and let his drunken fancy reel rather more than note down laboriously facts; and hectographed poems behind the lines and led his cortège of desirous ones through the boulevards. There will sing again for a moment a poem of the sort of the best of poems; a life lived out, a human figure irradiated by imagination, a flowering chestnut standing fine in asphalt and among city blocks. And through touch of it, poetry cannot but spread stiffer its wings.