

Apollinaire: une biographie de guerre 1914-1918-2009

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Annette Becker's new book, *Apollinaire: Une biographie de guerre* dissects how Guillaume Apollinaire negotiated a war made up of 'cultures ... privées et publique, intimes et proclamées' [cultures ... private and public, intimate and official] (p. 13). An urbane, multi-talented poet of the French *belle époque* who made his name in the golden years before the war, when writers and artists from around the world met in Paris to contemplate the role of art in life and society, like many of his colleagues Apollinaire was captivated by the conflict from the moment it became clear that the simmering tensions of the years leading up to August 1914 would break, producing a violence that was, despite the anticipations and fears of many informed and uninformed Europeans, shocking. For Apollinaire and for France, the experience would prove aesthetically and culturally transformative.

The poet's initial reaction to mobilisation was disbelief. On the 29th of July he was in Deauville, enjoying the summer season: 'Beaucoup de jeunes filles, Allemandes, Suédoises, Françaises, Anglaises' [Lots of young girls, Germans, Swedes, French and English]. As the rumours of war filtered through the holiday air, worry set in, touched with a sense of resistance to what now seemed inevitable. Apollinaire wrote to Serge Férat, 'Presque tout le monde fout le camp. Moi, je n'y crois pas' [Just about everyone has buggered off. Myself, I cannot quite believe it] (p. 17). All the sudden the war had become the key player in everyone's lives. Apollinaire gently mocked the new catch phrase that he and everyone else now used to explain the new sights and sounds dominating French public life: "'C'est la guerre", disons-nous' ['It's the war', we say] (p. 18). Soldiers started to appear in Deauville, Versailles and Paris.

Later in the war in 1915, while stationed at Nîmes, Apollinaire drafted a narrative poem about the experience of the opening months of the war, with verses that would later be included in *Calligrammes: Poèmes de la paix et de la guerre (1913-1916)*

, first published in France in 1918. The poem speaks of the ‘Des géants furieux se dressaient sur l’Europe ...’ [Furious giants tower over Europe] and ‘Les morts tremblaient de peur dans leurs sombres demeures’ [The dead tremble with fear in their sombre abodes] (p. 19). It also contains one of the poet’s famous calligrammes, the form he began experimenting with in 1912. It is consciously modern and innovative in its intellectual construction, as Apollinaire worked to make the words physically form a picture expanding on the poem’s subject. At the same time the poem’s theme is traditional: a portrait of a nation and a continent moving from peace to war that attempts to convey the collective spirit of the times. In this aspect it is like the poetry written by Rudyard Kipling and Thomas Hardy upon the death of Edward VII, what C. M. Bowra calls ‘public’ poetry, designed to capture an impression of a particular historical moment for posterity.⁽¹⁾ Yet the soft paired and alternating rhymes produce something like ‘un chant populaire’ [a popular song or ballad] (p. 19). He dedicated *Calligrammes* to his friend René Delize, killed in battle in May 1917; he wrote that it was this death of all the war deaths that ‘m’a touché plus que tout’ [has affected me more than anything else] (p. 159). Memory and memorialisation collude throughout the poem: memory of 1914 and memorialisation of dead friends. This is also a central theme of Becker’s study, as Apollinaire’s war poems, letters and journals all capture and promote the idea that war culture, when experienced, relies on a combination of forces and estates, of private emotions mixing with communal pride, patriotism, suffering and remembrance.

For students interested in a detailed account of Apollinaire’s actions throughout the war, this book is useful because it is so concentrated, although it is not a traditional biography cataloguing exact movements and itineraries. It is narrative, beginning with Apollinaire’s unsuccessful attempts to enter the French army and the French Foreign Legion, followed by his eventual enlistment at Nice in November 1914. The poet then embarks on training to become an artillery officer, an experience enriched by a course on mathematics. He passes through his period as a soldier at war in Northern and North Eastern France. Having received a head wound inflicted by a shell in March 1916, Apollinaire returns to Paris, publishes *Le Poète Assassiné* and reassumes his place as a poet and critic, arguing about art and war with colleagues such as Louis Dimier and producing experimental theatre with Serge Diaghilev. He dies, a victim of the influenza epidemic, two days before the Armistice in November 1918.

Although this is a fact-filled, substantially researched book about Apollinaire’s life during the war, Becker’s primary concern is with painting a picture of the public and private worlds, which, like a pot of paint with any number of colours thrown in, cannot be separated and neatly defined by literary or cultural historians. Becker is highly attuned to the complexities informing the France that Apollinaire inhabited from 1914 to 1918. In this biography, which is equally an exploration of French war culture as Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau defined it in *1914–1918: Understanding the Great War* (‘a collection of representations of the conflict that crystallised into a system of thought which gave the war its deep significance’ ⁽²⁾), she examines the artistic pastiches formed of the rich and saturated world of popular culture and intellectual collaboration, as well as the social “discourses” familiar to historians of the period: issues of art, material and popular culture, nationalism, race, gender, the body and mental and physical violence.

Becker pays close attention to Apollinaire's struggles as Wilhelm de Kostrowitzky, whose antecedents were not French but Polish and Russian; while the rest of Apollinaire's adopted nation was 'mobilisé, les étrangers sont immobilisés' [mobilised, the foreigners were immobilised] (p. 29). She argues that his intense pride in being a soldier defending French civilisation, his desire 'ne quittera plus jamais la guerre et l'uniforme française' [never to leave the war or take off his French uniform] (p. 32) fuelled not only his patriotism but his hatred of the Germans, even his fellow artists, of whom he wrote, 'Ces Boches aux sentiments factices, à l'âme infecte et qui sont l'opprobre de l'humanité' [The brutal sentiments of the Germans, souls infected, are an affront to humanity] (p. 93). The war nationalised his view of art, and called into question the idea of an international community of intellectuals existing above politics. He felt that artists had a duty to fight: in Becker's words, "'l'art vivant' est celui de ceux qui sont prêt à mourir pour la patrie en danger' [the 'living art' belongs to those who are prepared to die for their endangered homeland] (p. 51). All but one: he granted his friend Pablo Picasso a 'privilège de exceptionnalité' (p. 48). Like most people, in war and in peace, Apollinaire was not entirely consistent in his opinions.

He exhibited an anti-authoritarian streak: he loved his fellow soldiers, was compelled by the material objects of quotidian art that filled the trenches, the 'trophées d'amour, d'amitié, de piété' [trophies of love, of friendship, of piety] (p. 122), but blamed any aesthetic lapses on the military authorities (p. 124). Despite his uncertainty about some of the superstitions and rituals of his comrades, he wrote home to his fiancée only half-jokingly in 1916: 'J'ai été blessé sans doute parce que vous n'avez plus pensé à moi et qu'ainsi le talisman ne pouvait pas agir' [Without a doubt I was wounded because you didn't think of me often enough and because the talisman didn't work] (p. 147). Although Apollinaire resettled himself into the world of artistic Paris when it became clear that his injuries prevented a return to his battalion, he tended to deride the home front [à soupçonner l'arrière] (p. 171); 'revenu à Paris, il pose toujours en soldat – et en soldat blessé héroïquement' [Having returned to Paris, he always remained a soldier – and a heroically wounded soldier] (p. 172). Like many soldiers and civilians, from 1914 he fully accepted what George Mosse calls the 'Myth of War Experience', believing that the soldiers formed a society separate from civilians.⁽³⁾

The title of the book also includes a subscript denoting the period that it covers '1914–1918–2009'. The process of memorialisation, and how it shapes to what has come to be understood as historic memory, contributes to the nuance of this portrait of war culture. Apollinaire was aware of the fact that if he died, civilians, including friends and fellow artists, would take over and determine how his reputation evolved. For the press, the very nature of Apollinaire's death had to be explained away. 'Spanish flu' not only carried with it a sense of something foreign; death by illness could not compare to death in battle. It represented a threat to masculinity by something insidiously feminine: the illness was also known as the 'dame espagnole' [the Spanish lady] (p. 208). On 11 November 1918 *L'Action française* reported that Apollinaire had received his wound at Verdun, the site of such national investment of collective sacrifice, implying, incorrectly, that this was what caused his death (p. 211). In the immediate post-war years, fellow poets and artists, including Picasso, contributed their monuments, expanding upon the myth of the lost artist. As views of the validity of the First World War, and war in general changed, a popular myth arose that the patriotic poet was actually an anti-war martyr; Becker points out that this is a thoroughly post-war construction (p. 245–6). Not only French but international artists responded to idealisations of Apollinaire, from the American Dan Flavin to the Japanese writer Kenzaburo Oe. The book also includes some fascinating copies of modern portraits of Apollinaire, including one by Erró (1979) and another, entitled *Les Apollinaires* by Pierre Buraglio (2005–6) that show the extent to which his *blessure* [wound] has come to represent France's lost generation, providing an important *lieux de mémoire* of Apollinaire's extended posthumous life (p. 249).

It would have been fruitful for Becker to compare the products of this period of memorialisation more directly to those that contributed to poet-soldier mythologies in other combatant cultures. Apollinaire edited himself, like any artist, and remained conscious that much of what he wrote would be read by someone else, and would contribute to their ideal of the poet at war. Like, for example, Rupert Brooke and *1914 and Other Poems*, throughout his work, and particularly with *Le Poète Assassiné* he created self-epitaphs that, in their ambivalence, were ready-made for mythmakers. That said, the scale of the book, despite comprising only four years of Apollinaire's life, is already ambitious enough given the need to contextualise so much primary

material in a period of such concentrated social upheaval. The unfinished quality of diaries, journals and letters included in the study, filled with fragments of verse and ideas alongside more fully formed observations not only provide insight for those wishing to form a fuller understanding of Apollinaire as a complex and influential poet and artist. They also produce a picture of war culture that one feels is at least a degree closer to authenticity with respect to the way it might have been experienced.

From the primary material one comes to understand that as he absorbed or rejected the myriad sensations and experiences that surrounded him, at the front and in *l'arrière*, Apollinaire was attempting to understand and even order what was happening to him and to his world. The war fed his evident enthusiasm for all that was new and different, but he also displayed an intense engagement with the suffering of the body and the strange detachment from violence required of soldiers and civilians alike, and sympathy for the emotional confusions and, at times, derangements the war gave birth to. Apollinaire wanted the war to mean something. His letters, diaries and letters, as well as his war poems, particularly in 1916 and 1915, 'l'âge d'or de ces productions, témoignent de la complexité et de la confusion des sentiments, dans l'authenticité du désir de vivre en un temps de souffrance et de déréliction' [the golden age of these works, testifying about the complexity and confusion of sentiments, about the authentic desire to live in a time of suffering and abandonment] (p. 119) provide compelling evidence of this.

Becker's unimposing and intelligent commentary, as well as structure of the book, with thematic subsections examining the place of the *étranger* in France at its most patriotic; the role of the intellectual or artist at war; the psychologies of occupation; colonial troupes; divisions between the *front militaire* and the *front domestique*; the art, high and low' the war produced; xenophobia and anti-Semitism, wounds and medical discourses; the Parisian avant-garde; Spanish influenza and artistic memorialising and cultural memory all give context to Apollinaire's writings. She also reminds us that he was not alone in his attempts, messy and unresolved as they were, to search for what was important and substantial in what was happening from 1914 to 1918. The war appeared random and terrifying when *les obus* [shells] were falling around the Chemin des Dames, and bland, dreary and replete with hypocrisy when reflecting on it in Paris, but it was also, for Apollinaire and for French culture, a seminal experience.

Happily for the reader, Becker allows the poet to tell us this, with some gentle guidance from her, in his own words. Any historian knows that there is a danger in including too much primary material, much of it fragmentary, and incorporated here in long quotations often uninterrupted by Becker. The book does at times give one the sense of sitting in an archive, and Apollinaire could have run away with it, but it also reads very well, and one is left with a deeper understanding of the artist and the war as a physical experience, an intellectual and emotional challenge, and a mythological construction. Its structure supports Becker's approach as a cultural historian, to show that Apollinaire is an individual with an independent mind as well as a product of his particularly rich society. The implicit argument is that this is the case with any figure, male or female, that one could single out from the First World War or, indeed, from any historical period. The point in this case is that the primary material relating to Apollinaire is so prolific, varied and interesting, touching on so many themes and discourses that it can almost be left untouched. Almost: it is Becker's quiet command of the period that makes for a very successful portrait of one man's attempt to understand his own life and history in the context of a war that was revelatory for those who lived through it, as well as those who attempt to understand it now.

Notes

1. C. M. Bowra, *Poetry and Politics, 1900-1960* (Cambridge, 1966). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, with Catherine Temerson (trans.), *1914-1918: Understanding the Great War* (London, 2002), p. 102. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford, 1990). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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