

A POLLINAIRE: THE 'POET OF MODERN LIFE'

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Of all the innovative late nineteenth, early twentieth century French writers, Guillaume Apollinaire had perhaps the greatest impact on the international avant-garde. From the age of thirty, his works—art and literary criticism, poetry, prose and theatre—reached an ever wider international audience. He was the mediator, interpreter and critic of the new trends in art not only for a national but for an international audience. Provocative essays such as *Les Peintres cubistes* (1912), *L'Antitradition futuriste* (1913) and *L'Esprit nouveau et les poètes* (1917) proposed a manifesto, a programme and a call to artistic arms.¹ *Le Poète assassiné* (1916) et *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (1917) offered a new aesthetic for the novel and the theatre respectively. He coined the term 'surrealist' in the subtitle of *Mamelles*, described as a "surrealist drama", and explained in the preface that it was intended to describe a non-naturalistic but analogical way of representing reality. Apollinaire argued that when man wanted to imitate movement he invented the wheel and not a pair of mechanical legs. This same principle should be applied to art: its role is not to imitate and reproduce a familiar and recognisable reality but to evoke through the powers of the imagination a sur-reality. In these and other works Apollinaire sought to redefine the role of the artist, attributing to the creative artist a prophetic role; identifying with magicians and visionaries, he claimed for art a share in the divine, perhaps indeed art was the last refuge of the divine which had been crowded out of the modern world.

It was his poetry however—and particularly the two major collections *Alcools* (1913) and *Calligrammes* (1914-15)—that had the most immediate and direct impact on the international avant-garde.² The extent of his influence can be measured by the frequency of references to his work in the avant-garde reviews of many countries, as well as by the speed with which his work was translated. In the USA, in Germany, Spain and Italy, in Czechoslovakia,³ in Latin America, poets engaged with his ideas, translated his work, declared themselves his followers.

He was described as an "aesthetic explorer", comparable perhaps to Christopher Columbus or Marco Polo. Experimental reviews would often open with a translation of one of his poems, placing their project under his aegis, recognising his pioneering rôle.⁴ In particular, 'Zone' (1913), which I will refer to at some length here, was cited as a key work, which everyone related to the modern movement, whether friend or foe, knew well.⁵ Although Bohn concludes that, exceptionally, Apollinaire had few followers in Britain, it might however be argued that his influence extended to T. S. Eliot, an author steeped in French symbolist poetry, whose poem 'The Waste Land' (1922) bears a title that echoes one of the meanings of 'zone': the desolate wasteground on the fringes of a city. Apollinaire's followers were influenced by his daring experimentation with the conventions of the genre: the 'cubist' technique of juxtaposition, the combination of visuals and text in the *Calligrammes*, the abolition of all punctuation (from *Alcools* on), uneven line length, occasional rhyme, all these features of his poetry signified the liberation of poetry from centuries-old formal conventions. And to match the innovation in form, there was the radical content of his work: accepting Baudelaire's challenge to be the "poet of modern life",⁶ to seek the eternal and the infinite in the fleeting and transitory phenomena of urban life, Apollinaire demonstrated that any object could be the subject of poetry, including all the new inventions and technologies crowding in on city life.

It can be argued that France was at the forefront in the development of a new aesthetic sensibility which began to emerge around the middle of the nineteenth century and found in its problematic relationship to the city its privileged field of expression. For the city was a concrete symbol of the modern, particularly in France where the Second Empire saw the massive renovation of Paris carried out by Haussmann. What more potent symbol could one imagine of the end of the old ways than the boulevards cutting violently across the medieval quarters, bringing light, reason, technological progress into the darkest corners of the city? On the one hand a powerful symbol of progress and enlightenment, the modern city demonstrated the human capacity for radical voluntary transformation, it multiplied new aesthetic experiences and opened up original perspectives through the juxtaposition of old and new. On the other hand, the obliteration of centuries-old landmarks steeped in history and tradition symbolised the deracination of modern man and highlighted the need to establish new reference points to provide the framework for self and identity. The burgeoning city seemed to represent the site where this battle was to be waged—and lost or won.

The second half of the nineteenth century also saw an extremely rapid rise in the population of Paris. This demographic explosion, coupled with the renovation of the city and the impact of new technology—from bicycles to the cinema—all combined to focus and concentrate on Paris the multi-faceted prism of modernity. The novelists sought to understand and depict the labyrinthine complexities of the urban scene through realism: Balzac, with romantic excess of course, portrayed Paris as a powerful and fatal web of corruption, where money and privilege held sway. And later Zola in his 'naturalistic' novels, continued the claim to be presenting the city scientifically, depicting Paris, writes Richard Lehan, as: "an alienating mechanism that inculcated a degenerative process by creating a diseased center outside of nature".⁷ The poets, however, turned away from claims of objectivity, away from the reproduction of physical reality towards inward processes and subjectivity. Their observations of city life sought to engage with it on a higher plane, to resist its surface meanings in pursuit of the transcendence uniquely available to the artist who works with his imagination.

Charles Baudelaire called for a new aesthetic to match the changes wrought by the modern world. In 'The Painter of Modern Life' (written 1859-60 and published in 1863) Baudelaire penned an encomium to the work of Constantin Guys, the author of pen and ink sketches and water-colours of Parisian scenes and characters. The genius of Guys, writes Baudelaire, lies in his "keen appreciation of life".⁸ With the fresh vision of a child, he evokes by his rapid brushstrokes the exhilaration, the ecstasy of all that is novel; capturing the fleeting, dynamic character of urban phenomena, he makes his "domicile amongst numbers, amidst fluctuation and movement, amidst the fugitive and infinite".⁹ The city creates and demands a new mode of perception, of representation, of aesthetic sensibility and practice. But not in order to pursue a renewed naturalism or imitation of the real; rather in order to infuse the quotidian with the transformative, heroic powers of art: "Modernity is that which is ephemeral, fugitive, contingent upon the occasion; it is half of art, whose other half is the eternal and unchangeable".¹⁰

As incarnation of this search for transcendence, Baudelaire—building on an urban type developed by Balzac—refined the figure of the artist as *'flâneur'*, the observer who is in the city but remains aloof from its imposed rhythms, who observes as others are dragged along by the currents of urban life. They are slaves to its utilitarian and materialistic dictates, their eyes are fixed on the immediate goals of work, travel, home. The artist's gaze is detached, reflexive; he sees both within

himself and, turning his gaze outwards, what others cannot see from within the blinkers of their daily routine. The city represents, then, for the artist, both fascination and danger: he is fascinated and inspired by its multiple stimulations, its continuously changing streetscapes, its unexpected juxtapositions; but the city poses also a danger through the forced cohabitation of the artist with the ever-present masses in the streets and the risk of contamination from their materialist preoccupations. How to protect the individuality and unique vision of the artist, under constant assault by the deafening, homogenising bustle of the city? This search for distinction, to be in the city but not engulfed in it, becomes a major preoccupation of the art of the early twentieth century. Modernism seeks to both respond to and resist the encroachment of the city, by turning back against it the poetic power of symbolism, infused often with nostalgia for a lost spiritual homeland.

This last point brings us to Apollinaire. Despite the profoundly innovative role attributed to him by his followers, despite his championing of the new trends in poetry and painting, there remains a fundamental ambiguity in his work, a profound tension between tradition and modernity, ultimately unresolved, and which finds one of its privileged fields of expression in his relationship to the city. It is this particular complex of attitudes that I intend to explore in my discussion of Apollinaire's poetry, and particularly of the influential 'Zone'.

Apollinaire is above all the poet of the city. Although born of a Polish mother and Italian father (outside of marriage) and brought up in a vagabond way in Italy, Monaco and the South of France, Apollinaire adopted Paris in 1899 and immersed himself in the seething cultural life of the time, becoming a crucial intermediary between the Parisian practitioners of the new art and the public. Forced to make his living at first at whatever employment he could find (bank employee, tutor), from 1907 he lived by writing a wide range of texts, from literary and artistic reviews to libertine works—a precarious life, and one which threw him into the rhythms of city life, of late-night walks through deserted streets and along the quays to reach his lodgings. Paris was the landscape of his soul; his most famous poem 'Le Pont Mirabeau' depicts the poet on the bridge, watching the Seine flow beneath, symbol of the passage of time and the passing of love. The names of real streets and metro stations, buildings and quays, punctuate his poetry, form the backdrop to his wanderings and provoke memories, invention and reverie. It is impossible to live elsewhere, he declares in a diatribe against Nature and the countryside: "Comment

peut-on vivre ailleurs qu'à la ville? /Ailleurs on est en exil" ("How can one live anywhere else but in town? /Elsewhere one is in exile", 'La Campagne', *Poèmes retrouvés*¹¹).

A striking feature of his poetry is the inclusion of the machines and technology of modern city life, whose power and energy are often portrayed positively: factories and their workers ("J'aimais j'aimais le peuple habile des machines"—"I liked I liked the skillful people of the machines", '1909', *Alcools*); the cinema ('Avant le cinéma', *Il y a*); electricity and tramways ('La Chanson du mal-aimé', *Alcools*). Air-planes figure frequently, indeed a whole poem is dedicated to Ader, the French aviation pioneer whom some consider was the first man to fly, and who invented the term "avion", a term which is much to Apollinaire's liking: "Cette douce parole eût enchanté Villon/Les poètes prochains la mettront dans leurs rimes" ("This gentle word would have enchanted Villon/Future poets will put it in their verse", 'L'Avion', *Poèmes retrouvés*). This celebration of a new term finds an echo in his musings on the terms cinéma, ciné, cinématographe ('Avant le cinéma') and reveals his aim to include in his poetry the vocabulary of this new world.

In 'Zone' (1913—placed at the head of the collection *Alcools*) Apollinaire affirms from the opening of the poem his determination to be 'modern': addressing himself he declares: "you are weary of the ancient world"; "You have had enough of living in Greek and Roman antiquity". Instead his poetry is in immediate contact with the city around him; as he walks through the streets, tracing a péripétie which is at the same time emotional and geographical, he incorporates, collage-like, into his poem the 'art' and 'literature' of the city:¹²

You read handbills catalogues posters singing aloud
That's what poetry is this morning and for prose there are the papers
There are 25-centime instalments full of detective stories
Portraits of the famous and a thousand assorted titles

He admires a "pretty street" and the "gracefulness of this factory street"; greets the "bright new herald" of the morning sun (the poem seems to recount a day's wandering through Paris, from morning to very early the following day). He mingles with the crowds of workers: "Directors and labourers and beautiful shorthand-typists".

The geographical precision in the naming of streets, reference to "today", and use of the present tense, apparently centre the poet in the here and now; and yet the poem leaps from present to past, from place to place, from prosaic reality to bitter-sweet memories to soaring

imagination. Through his half real, half imaginary journey, he conveys the confusion of the jumble of images offered by the modern city: the abrupt transition from wealth to poverty, from ease to distress, the juxtaposition of sacred and profane, of high and low. At one moment he is in a "low drinking place/ Drinking a penny coffee among the unfortunates"; in the next line: "You are in a great restaurant at night". The self is fragmented into the multiple selves that are recalled and evoked through his memories, and through his observations of himself as though he were just another passer-by among the city crowds. He shifts from first to second person and there seems to be no pattern in his shift from I to You: it is not the case for example that memories are always evoked in the second person and the present in the first; rather his identity fades in and out, jumps around unpredictably, destabilising the narrative of his journey. His emotional state is precarious and wildly changeable: shame, anxiety, terror, horror are all evoked as he recalls the "painful and joyful journeys" of his past, but the present too holds its share of distress and pity, of emotional confusion.

His evocation of the city in the early verses seems a celebration of its life and animation. Yet even in the early lines there are notes of discordance, unpleasant sounds that impinge on the poet's consciousness: "an irascible bell in full cry"; "nameplates and notices that shriek like parrots". As the poem progresses he is conscious of his isolation, perhaps of his vulnerability: "And now you are walking all alone in Paris among the crowds/ And herds of roaring omnibuses are rolling past you". More disturbing images come to the fore: "Today you are walking in Paris and the women are covered with blood". The poem opens out to other remembered places where the poet has been, "passing slowly backward through the history of your life": Prague, Saint Vit., Marseilles, Coblenz, Rome, Amsterdam; almost all the places recalled are cities. He sums up his experiences: "You made painful and joyful journeys/ Before you discovered falsehood and old age". Returning to the present he sees the emigrants waiting at the Gare St Lazare—they are voyagers like himself, but they are in search of fortune, he in search of dreams. As the poem closes he lists other outsiders of the city: the refugees who live in "hovels"; Jewish women in their wigs glimpsed at the back of shops; the "unfortunates" in a "low drinking place" where he too finds himself. His relationship to the city dwellers reveals itself in these final lines to be more typical of the nineteenth-century artistic avant-garde than the optimistic association with the city's workers of the early verses: now he associates himself with the city's outcasts, the emigrants and refugees, the prostitutes, the destitute, the Jews. Yet he is not one of them either: "You are alone and soon it will be morning".

The language of the poem incorporates the most prosaic expressions ("the airfield hangars"; "between Monday morning and Saturday evening") juxtaposed with flights of metaphorical fancy ("O Eiffel tower shepherdess the bridges this morning are a bleating flock"). A poetic evocation of images related to religion is rounded off by a phrase that could have come from a sporting paper: "It is God who dies on Friday and is resurrected on Sunday/ Christ climbing heavenward faster than aviators/ Holder of the world altitude record". Apollinaire thus continues the extension of poetic vocabulary begun in the nineteenth century, using familiar or vulgar terms as well as traditional poetic vocabulary. His use of metaphor also mixes the sacred and the profane as in the simile: "religion/Remains as simple as the airfield hangars". Metaphors such as: "O Eiffel Tower shepherdess the bridges this morning are a bleating flock", and the "herds of roaring omnibuses are rolling past", break the barrier between the traditionally distinct domains of country and city, and are an ironic echo of the romantic and pastoral poetic genres.

The form of the poem is irregular, the lines disjointed: certain lines are detached and they are of uneven length. There is no regular rhythm or rhyme; punctuation has been eliminated, leaving the words to stand alone or group together unexpectedly, in uncertain relation to their neighbours. The verb tenses jump around chaotically, and the subject changes unpredictably. The poem reproduces in its form, then, the fragmentation and disorder of the urban experience, subject to the jagged interruptions in attention and the unpredictable juxtapositions imposed by the cityscape. What holds the fragments together—precariously—is the consciousness of the poet: on the one hand 'Zone' offers a subjective journey through personal and unique memories and experiences, with a constant and unpredictable change of focus from external to internal impressions following the aleatory movement of the poet's mind. On the other, the poet attempts to give symbolic resonance to his work, to create a new mythology to transport the raw material of urban existence into the realms of the transcendent and the eternal, into the realm of art. As he walks, there crowds into his mind a jumble of images from the Church and Christianity, from pagan myths, from the ancient world: Icarus and Apollonius of Tyana, Simon Magus of Judea. Angels and priests fly towards heaven, flocks of exotic birds—some real, some fabled—swoop and wheel in the skies, and they are accompanied by airplanes which also soar and descend, but without folding their wings:

The sirens leave the perilous passages of the sea
 And arrive singing all three of them most marvelously
 And all of them eagle phoenix and Chinese pi-his
 Fraternize with the flying machine

Thus do the symbols of the past and present, of myth and reality, of spirituality and materialism, intermingle in his mind. But since he "has had enough of the world of Antiquity", he is in search of a mythico-symbolic system that will allow him to deal with the modern world, the world of cars and planes, of omnibuses and advertising, a system that will enable him in his poem to transcend the perilous jumble of fleeting images and impression. But to what extent does he succeed? Is the promise of a new aesthetic that will "create the infinite and the eternal from the fleeting and transitory" a mirage? There is a sense of nostalgia in 'Zone', often overlooked by critics, for lost certainties and the rich ritual of religion. Lengthy passages evoke the vivid images and ceremonies associated with the religion of his childhood, a time of naive but absolute faith. Can religion still bestow meaning on the modern world, can it offer a source of inspiration? He declares early in the poem: "You alone in Europe O Christianity are not ancient/ And the most modern European is you Pope Pius X"—yet his "shame" prevents him now from entering a church. Jesus flies heavenwards along with angels and priests, with flocks of birds, with Icarus and Apollonius of Tyana—figures from the myths and legends of the Antiquity he declares he has tired of—but now accompanied by airplanes. Can an airplane—the perfect symbol of the modern—represent the transcendent? Apparently only in uneasy association with the figures that have traditionally carried the connotations of transcendence. These strange juxtapositions do not constitute a coherent mythico-symbolic system, as the poet seems finally to be aware. At the end of the poem he wishes only to go home to "sleep amongst your South Sea Island fetishes and your Guianese idols/ Which are Christs of dissimilar forms and of other beliefs"—borrowing, that is to say, the spirituality of other distant (and non-urban) cultures, to escape the loss of meaning of his own. This sense of failure is reinforced by the final line, where the "bright new sun" of the beginning of the poem reappears as the "beheaded sun":¹³ if the rising sun is a traditional symbol of hope, the setting sun, here given a violent end, is a symbol of death, perhaps of a "decapitated god" and a "decentred world".¹⁴

At the heart of modernism, it can be argued, lies the problematic relationship of the artist to the city, to its anonymous crowds, its philis-

tine pursuits, its mechanised routines, its inhuman scale. 'Zone' not only recounts a day's *flânerie* through the jolting contradictions of Paris, not only a journey through painful personal memories; it can be seen as an allegory of the poet's epic quest to engage with yet transcend the city. Apollinaire's ambition was nothing less than to accompany the painters in the reinvention of their art, to be the poet of modern life. It is interesting to find in this extremely influential poem some indications of the ambiguity and complexity of the task of the modern poet, called on to find the epic in the quotidian in order to bring together in an aesthetic synthesis those two halves of modern art that Baudelaire had identified: the fleeting present and the eternal. But beauty has failed: "This was and I wish I could forget it it was at the time of the failing of beauty"; what remains is his odyssey in search of a spiritual homeland amidst the debris of the broken classical statues and antique relics that strew his imagination.

NOTES

- 1 He also contributed to many of the leading avant-garde periodicals including Pierre Albert-Biro's *Sic*, Picabia's *391* and Reverdy's *Nord-Sud*.
- 2 Details of the extent of Apollinaire's influence on both poets and artists can be found in William Bohn, *Apollinaire and the International Avant-Garde*, SUNY Series, The Margins of Literature, edited by Mihai I. Spariosu (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997). Bohn mentions amongst many names, as particularly important followers, in Germany: Alfred Richard Meyer and Yvan Goll. In Italy: Alberto Savinio; in the USA: Alfred Stieglitz and Henry McBride.
- 3 Bohn argues that he was a crucial influence on the 'ultraists' in Spain who published around 30 translations of his work. Ramon Gomez de la Serna, exchanged correspondence with Apollinaire in 1916; Rafaël Cansinos-Asséns also admired him, but his most fervent disciple was Guillermo de Torre who later travelled to Argentina and Uruguay, spreading the word.
- 4 Stephen Hart traces Apollinaire's influence amongst Spanish, Latin American and Catalan poets in 'The Avant-Garde in Spain and Spanish America', *Corner*, no. 1 (September 1998), <http://www.cornermag.org/corner01/index.htm>. Accessed 20/08/05.
- 5 Mark Frutkin, in the introduction to his *Atmosphères Apollinaire*, quotes Ginsberg as exhorting him to: "Read Apollinaire. Read his long poem, 'Zone'". *Atmosphères Apollinaire* (Erin, Ontario: Porcupine's Quill, 1988).
- 6 According to Malcolm Witkowsky, Apollinaire's friend Ivan Goll introduced his work to the Devestil movement, and wrote in 1921 'Paris brennt', in imitation of 'Zone': Malcolm Witkowsky, *Papers of Surrealism*, vol. 2 (Summer 2004), p. 7.
- 7 William Bohn, 'Apollinaire et l'avant-garde internationale', *Que Flo-Ve?* série 3 no. 2 (juillet-septembre 1997), pp. 90-94 (p. 94).
- 8 Bohn, 'Apollinaire et l'avant-garde internationale', p. 92.
- 9 Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', *My heart laid bare and other writings* (London: Soho Book Company, 1986).
- 10 Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature: an Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley/Los

- Angeles/ London: University of California Press, 1998), p. 70.
- 11 Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', p. 91.
 - 12 Baudelaire, 'The Painter...', p. 33.
 - 13 Baudelaire, 'The Painter...', p. 37.
 - 14 The title *Poèmes retrouvés* refers to a collection of Apollinaire's poetry published by Pierre-Marcel Adéma and Michel Décaudin in *Apollinaire: Œuvres poétiques* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1965).
 - 15 The quotations used in the following discussion of 'Zone' are taken from the translation by Oliver Bernard: *Apollinaire: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1965).
 - 16 The line "soleil cou coupé" has been interpreted in a number of ways, including as a reference to a bird, but early drafts of the poem make it clear that the primary reference is to the sun.
 - 17 These expressions are found in Lionel Richard, 'En marge de "Zone"', *Magazine Littéraire* no. 348 (novembre 1996).