

THE ALCOOLS OF  
GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE:  
WHY AND WHY NOW

Many translations, including my *Alcools*, begin in the unshakeable conviction that a writer, long-deceased, is nevertheless a contemporary, still speaking, still responding to the circumstances and occasions of the present. Translation does its best to draw attention to this miracle of immitigable presence and to become a medium of its wider acceptance. As Allen Ginsberg wrote in "At Apollinaire's Grave":

Guillaume Guillaume how I envy your fame your accomplish-  
ment for American letters  
your Zone with its long crazy line of bullshit about death  
come out of the grave and talk thru the door of my mind

The plain facts of Apollinaire's biography guarantee the continual, vocable resurrection upon which Ginsberg insists. Born in Rome to a Polish mother in August 1880, Apollinaire never knew his father or his father's name. Therefore he improvised a host of fathers throughout a lifetime of autobiographical improvisations, brilliantly re-inventing himself as the bastard of princes or prelates or, on one occasion, a pope. Schooled and raised within earshot of the Casino in Monte Carlo, he early learned the eminent operations of pure chance, operations which, on the grandest scale, have nearly completed the erasure of all ideologies in our new world order.

In early manhood, in Paris, Apollinaire found a milieu that re-invented itself daily with every gesture and pronouncement of its now-lionized company. And in this company of emigrés and outsiders, the improvised nature of Apollinaire found its natural habitat and necessary welcome. Inspired by company, the young poet responded with a welcome of his own. In prolific conversation with Picasso, Jarry, Max Jacob, Marie Laurencin, and many others, he introduced a city and a century to the revolutions already active in their midst. Along the way, he sometimes gave these revolutions their

proper names (as in his coining of the word “Surrealism”) and their proper dimensions (as in his many critical writings on the emergence of Cubism). Also along the way, as early as 1903 or 1904, he began the most durable improvisations of his imaginative life: the poems that would culminate in the composition of “Zone” in 1912 and in the publication of *Alcools* in 1913. As early as 1903 and 1904, in “The Song of the Poorly Loved” and “The Emigrant of Landor Road,” Apollinaire introduced the poetry of his young century to collage, polyphony, and the animation of inanimate objects in human view. One could honestly say he introduced the century to its true self, right from the start.

Apollinaire shared the absurdity and horror of the century in full measure with its glamor. In 1911 he was falsely arrested for the theft of the Mona Lisa and briefly imprisoned, an experience which produced the poem “At the Santé.” Reporting the incident, the *New York Times* described him as “a well-known Russian literary man living in Paris.” For such a figure, how could identity be, as it is for we who twist in the accusations and self-reproach of late-century political correctness, anything *but* improvisation? And in March 1916, in the uniform of his adopted country, Apollinaire was wounded in the head by a shell fragment, aptly enough while reading a literary magazine in his trench. He underwent two skull operations, afterwards sporting his bandages like an avant-garde chapeau. As Wittgenstein wrote, “Courage is always original,” i.e., always contemporary. In the terrible year 1918 Apollinaire married, quite spontaneously, Jacqueline Kolb, thus anticipating Breton’s dictum that life ought to be lived as though always at the brink of falling in love. On the weekend of the Armistice, the poet died of Spanish influenza, departing into the internationalism that is his most urgent bequest and relevance to us now. He was reported to have struggled vehemently against death, exhorting his physician, “I want to live! I still have so many things to say!”

At present, under the burden of canons and the burden of language’s deep complicity with countless atrocities, the very making of poems requires audacity. And if the audacity is well-intended, it requires a certain awkwardness as proof of its unrehearsed refusal to comply with silence. I have attempted a new translation of *Alcools* because, as a poet and as a reader of poetry, I feel lonely for joy and for the spur of joy. In my task, I have been constantly reminded by the poems themselves that transformation always begins in awkwardness and disproportion. Therefore, I chose to distort certain moments of syntax deliberately to reproduce Apollinaire’s verbal and thematic straying. The French verb *errer* describes his method well; *Alcools*

is intentionally aimless, preferring to find rather than to fashion its forms. And aimlessness, the total surrender of language to the immediate moment, is what made Apollinaire an inspiration to American Modernism. As critic Marjorie Perloff has shown (in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*), there is another “French connection” in American writing, one emanating not from the symbolic mysterium of Baudelaire but from the disorderly conduct of Rimbaud and Apollinaire among images made vivid by literal disorientation. What Perloff justly calls the “anti-illusionist” art of Williams and Pound, art energized by “the abolition of all transition,” owes a fortunate debt to the eloquent drift of Rimbaud’s “Drunken Boat” and, more nearly, to Apollinaire’s strolling “Zone” and “The Harvest Month.”

Also in the spirit of this other “French connection,” I chose to translate many passages in *Alcools* as “incorrect” mixes of high and low diction, of latinate and slang, of abstracted concretes and concretized abstractions, because it is just such mixes that have made Apollinaire so enabling to our contemporary poets. The beautiful solecisms of Ashbery’s groundbreaking *The Double Dream of Spring*, a collection of poems startled into existence by “The way the breath of spring creeps up on you and floors you,” would have been unthinkable without the example of Apollinaire’s verbal indiscretion. The exuberant, perverse loquacity of O’Hara’s masterpiece “Second Avenue” would have been impossible without Apollinaire’s own unpolished polyglot urbanity. And the passion-plays of Kenneth Koch, whether compulsive, as in “Sleeping with Women,” or tragically serene, as in “Days and Nights,” could never have accomplished quite so unabashed a sense of integrity without the first permission of Apollinaire’s deeply serious, deeply convincing utter awkwardness. Thus, as the audacities of 1913 may not seem audacious now, I have tried, in translating Apollinaire to the end of his century, to present him a new suit of grammars, a suit cut after his own audacious style.

As the century ends, it begins to forget itself and, under the guise of revisionism, obscures the origins of the Modern and of all its prolific aftermaths. An exaggerated sense of “now” suppresses the more genuine, more useful sense of “for now” inscribed within the etymology of “modern.” All great poems are causes, but not therefore exempt from causality. Each is itself an aftershock of some earlier disruption, some prior innovation. As William Carlos Williams cautioned, “Look at/what passes for the new.” Those who, in remembering *Alcools*, remember a whimsical, sorrowful, tragic *naïf* will not find him here. Apollinaire was a canny, complexly great poet with fierce but sophisticated appetites for modernity. In *Alcools*, ex-

perience reigns as a polymorphous sole authority, and everything is its nature, for now. There are many landscapes in *Alcools*, many cities. None is unreal. Modernism is always realism, for now. And as reality was the companion Apollinaire never failed to choose, I have chosen Apollinaire for a longtime companion, the best I've known.