

Apollinaire, Guillaume

By [Annette Becker](#)

Kostrowitzky, *Wilhelm* de (Guillaume Apollinaire)
French Poet
Born 25 August 1880 in Rome, Italy
Died 09 November 1918 in Paris, France

Although he actually died of Spanish influenza, the trepanned avant-garde poet was the embodiment of France’s “head wound”. Apollinaire’s letters to the woman he loved during the war, Lou, have become a prime example of war literature.

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During World War I

When poet Wilhelm de Kostrowitzky, alias Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918), voluntarily enlisted he did so in a frame of mind similar to many soldiers; his work as a writer and journalist helped define the public face of the war.

Apollinaire expressed his unfailing patriotism in his [letters](#), poems and caligrams. Destabilized by his stateless status, the war convinced him that it was time to become a French citizen. The play-on-words *Obus-roi* summed up his war experience from his arrival at the front in March 1915 until he was wounded.^[1] An [artilleryman](#), then an [infantry](#) man “incredibly happy to be at the front”, Apollinaire discovered that fire wounded, [killed](#) and [traumatized](#). Wounded to the head in March 1916 and trepanned, the poet, who worked as a [censor](#), remained mobilized in his writing.

Wartime Injury

He leveraged his war wound to help legitimize the avant-garde movement through his extremely active [literary activity](#) in Paris; he coined the word surrealism in the programme notes for the opening of *Parade*, the 1917 ballet creation by [Pablo Picasso](#) (1881-1973), [Erik Satie](#) (1866-1925), [Sergei Pavlovich Diaghilev](#) (1872-1929) and [Jean Cocteau](#) (1889-1963). His subtle oxymoron “Oh God, what a lovely war” was rather unsettling. He died of [Spanish influenza](#) in 1918 and was buried on 13 November in a victorious Paris busy jeering the recently deposed [Wilhelm II, German Emperor](#) (1859-1941). In the minds of many, only his wound to the head - the site of his genius - could have triumphed over the great writer “dead for France”; the numerous portraits by his artist friends have been influential in his being remembered this way.

Annette Becker, Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense

Section Editor: [Emmanuelle Cronier](#)

Translator: [Jocelyne Serveau](#)

Notes

1. ↑ A play on *Ubu Roi* ("King Ubu"), the name of the avant-garde play by [Alfred Jarry \(1873-1907\)](#); *obus* in French means "shell".

Selected Bibliography

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