

Apollinaire, Guillaume

By [Annette Becker](#)



Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918)

The young poet Guillaume Apollinaire wearing a bowler hat in Cologne in 1902.

Unknown photographer: Apollinaire, black-and-white photograph, n.p., 1902, in: Adhémar, Jean et al.: Apollinaire: [exposition], Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, [22 octobre-30 novembre] 1969, Paris 1969; source: Gallica, Bibliothèque nationale de France, [ark:/12148/bpt6k64593664](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64593664), <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64593664/f43.image>.

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Kostrowitzky, *Wilhelm* de

(Guillaume Apollinaire)

French Poet

Born 25 August 1880 in Rome, Italy

Died 09 November 1918 in Paris, France

Summary

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.

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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

- [Beaupré, Nicolas: **Soldier-writers and poets**, in: Winter, Jay \(ed.\): The Cambridge history of the First World War. Civil society, vol. 3, Cambridge 2014 Cambridge University Press, pp. 445-474.](#)
- [Becker, Annette: **La Grande guerre d'Apollinaire. Un poète combattant**, Paris, 2009: Tallandier.](#)

Citation

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External Links

- [Apollinaire, Guillaume: **Alcools: poèmes: 1898-1913 \(Troisième édition\)**, Paris 1920 \(Bibliothèque nationale de France\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Apollinaire, Guillaume: **Calligrammes. Poèmes de la paix et de la guerre, 1913-1916**, Paris 1918 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Apollinaire, Guillaume: **Case d'armons**, 1915 \(Bibliothèque nationale de France\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
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- [Apollinaire, Guillaume: **Le brigadier, Le pas de l'embusqué et Sans titre** \(Internet Archive\) \(Online Exhibition\)](#)
- [Apollinaire, Guillaume: **Le flaneur des deux rives**, Paris 1918 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Apollinaire, Guillaume: **Le poète assassin**, Paris 1916 \(Bibliothèque nationale de France\) \(Book\)](#)

- [Guillaume Apollinaire, Biographie \(Internet Archive\) \(Article\)](#)

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