little-known documents

Curiosities from the Front

GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE

INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION BY CEDRIC VAN DIJCK

Introduction

IN NOVEMBER 1916, WITH THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN FULL SWING, THE SOLDIERS OF THE 82ND TERRITORIAL INFANTRY REGIMENT OF THE French Forces opened the latest issue of their monthly regimental magazine, *Brise d'entonnoirs* ("Breeze from Bombcraters"), to find a piece by the avant-garde poet Guillaume Apollinaire.[1] Entitled "Curiosités du front" ("Curiosities from the Front"), it reinvents the everyday objects that cluttered the front lines: a shovel held up above the trench, for instance, becomes a dancing musical instrument as German bullets strike the shovel plate. This sense of humor was characteristic of the trench press, which existed to distract readers from the grim realities of warfare. Probably because it was thought to be so amusing or pertinent, Apollinaire's piece attracted some notice in its day. Several of its sections—"The Shovel," "Trellis," "The Bulletproof Shield"—found their way into other publications, at the front as well as in Paris, and some even made it onto the popular quotation pages of the official magazine of the French army, *Bulletin des Armées de la République*, of which an unsuspecting Apollinaire had written a year earlier, "Les pages consacrées aux citations sont merveilleuses" ("The pages dedicated to quotations are marvelous" [Letter to André Level]).[2]

At first glance, an avant-garde poet may appear out of place in *Brise d'entonnoirs*, but its readers would have appreciated Apollinaire's humorous take on their material world. His short piece, published here for the first time, rounds out what we know of the poet's interest in material culture—a fascination that had prompted Georges Dumahel's description of Apollinaire as "a secondhand furniture dealer" (Adamson 121). Strange objects surface in his writings in a range of genres, from an article on Duchamp's readymades and an anecdote on items forgotten in library books to a famous short story, "The Poet's Napkin," and his trademark form, the calligram, in which the letters of a poem form the shape of the object the poem examines. Predictably, once in uniform Apollinaire turned his attention to the material culture of the conflict, describing everyday objects like the new Adrian helmet, introduced in the French army in 1915, in inventive new ways. The helmet reminded him, Apollinaire wrote to his fiancée, Madeleine Pagès, of the barber's brazen basin

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used as a hood in *Don Quixote* (Letter to Madeleine Pagès), and it would later inspire him to compose a calligram in its image (Becker 125–26).[3] The helmet also appears in "Curiosities," not in an avant-garde poem or as an erudite reference but in a short and witty magazine piece, in which the poet envisions how the object can be put to different uses—for instance, as a seat or a basket for carrying eggs.[4] Behind these different writings lies a vanguard impulse to make the ordinary objects of warfare newly unfamiliar. "Curiosities," in particular, shows how Apollinaire's playfulness finds expression in different contexts, enriching our understanding of his art as a democratic project adapted to multiple audiences and of its author as a pragmatist, a protean figure, especially in wartime.

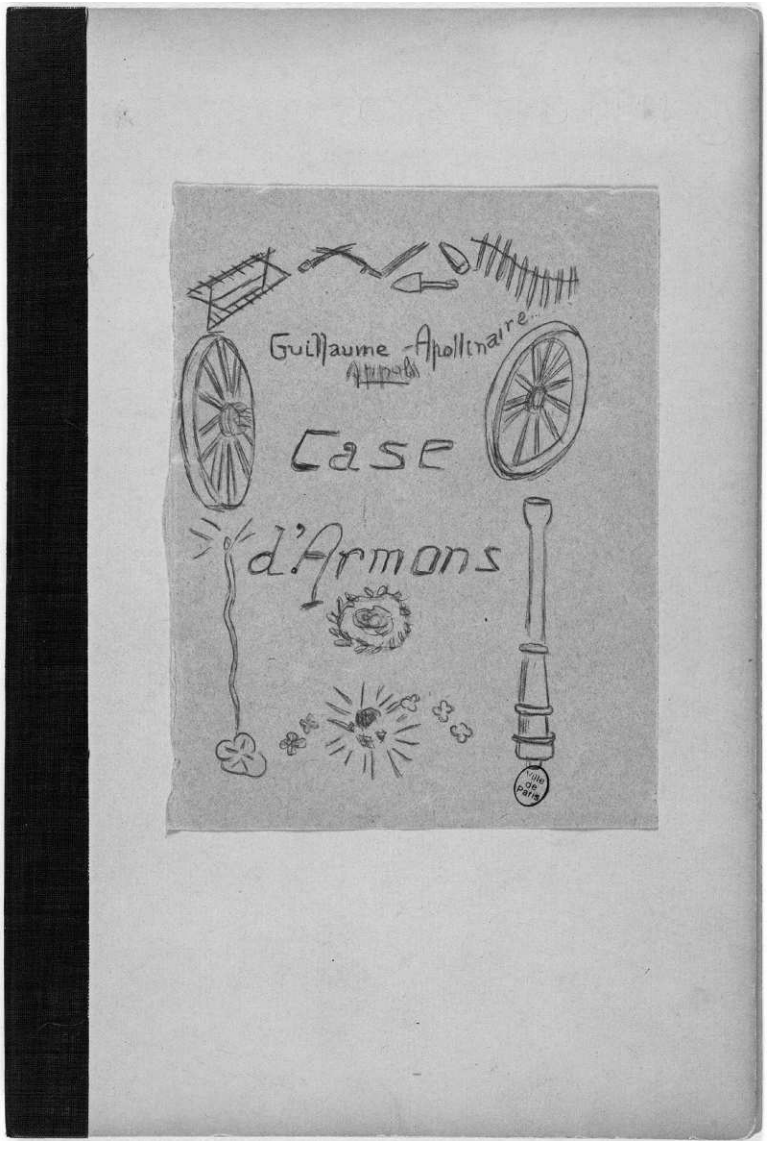


FIG. 1
Cover of Apollinaire's *Case d'armons*.

Whether meant for a coterie of artists or the soldiers reading *Brise d'entonnoirs*, Apollinaire's writings on wartime curiosities appear in part driven by a desire for preservation. In a longer piece he was drafting simultaneously for the *Mercure de France* ("French Mercury"), the poet found it "urgent de noter tout ce qui se rapportait au folklore de la guerre" ("vital to put in writing everything that referred to the folklore of the war" ["Contribution" 1382]). To be sure, the piece for *Brise* reads as an index of life at the front, safeguarding against time not simply the objects but also the humorous expressions ("*bleu horizon*," "Parisian foot") and the grievances (about hygiene, about flooded trenches) that traveled among soldiers.[5] Trench journals were therefore considered worth keeping: they are themselves tangible curiosities from the front as well as affective repositories of the lived experience there. In September 1915, Apollinaire sent his own trench publications for preservation to the Bibliothèque nationale de France and had already planned to publish his wartime letters "aux humains à venir" ("for future generations" [Letter to Louise de Coligny 247]).[6]

While it may be curious to encounter Apollinaire in *Brise d'entonnoirs*—the fact that he was never in the 82nd Regiment offers perhaps one explanation for why this piece has been overlooked—it is, after all, not so odd to find him taking part in the trench press at large. Apollinaire was an avid reader of and contributor to military magazines and wrote on the phenomenon in the mainstream press.[7] In June 1915, as a gunner at the front in Champagne, he helped see the

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short-lived journal of his battery, *Tranchman' Echo* ("Echo of the Trench Man"), to print. That month he also polygraphed his own collection of poems *Case d'armons* ("Flutchel")—its title page sporting the kind of curiosities under consideration here—on the same front-line stencil duplicator used for *Tranchman' Echo* (fig. 1).[8] Interestingly, published as it was more than a year after *Tranchman' Echo* and *Case*, the newly surfaced "Curiosities from the Front" not only underlines the poet's continued interaction with the trench press from Paris but also sheds new light on a liminal period in his life from which barely any writing survives. The date of publication suggests Apollinaire wrote this piece sometime after he had been wounded, while he was moving in and out of Parisian hospitals in the second half of 1916.[9] In this way, "Curiosities" can be read as attesting to a certain nostalgic connection the poet had felt to the world of the trenches.

Many writers and thinkers who, like Apollinaire, figure prominently in our discussions of modernism were enthusiastic supporters of trench journalism: Henri Bergson, for instance, wrote for the above-mentioned *Bulletin des Armées de la République*, Rabindranath Tagore for *Indian Ink*, Robert Musil for the *Tiroler Soldatenzeitung* ("Tirol Soldiers' Newspaper"), Christopher Nevinson for the *Gazette of the Third London General Hospital*, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and the Italian futurists for *Il Montello* ("The Hill"), and Joseph Conrad for *The Fledgling*. The trench press, then, is an untapped source for modernist studies. Intriguingly, Apollinaire's little-known "Curiosities from the Front" paves the way for a reevaluation of the place of these army magazines within modernism, allowing us to see more clearly the "modernist war" Vincent Sherry discerns among routinely used yet often unsubstantiated statements on "The Lost Generation" or "The Men of 1914" (6).

Not

For their many kindnesses, I am grateful to Maaheen Ahmed, Annette Becker, Laurence Campa, Marsya Demoor, Sarah Posman, Jasper Schelstraete, and Birgit Van Puymbroeck.

1. "Curiosités du front" appeared in two installments in consecutive issues. I treat them here as one text.

2. Excerpts were printed in *Journal du soldat* (1 December 1916 [4]; "The Soldier's Paper") and *Nouvelles de France* (22 February 1917 [157]; "News from France"), without reference to Apollinaire. Charpentier, the first historian of the French trench press, alludes to the piece but similarly fails to attribute it (69). Unless otherwise attributed, all translations are mine.

3. The poem remains unpublished.

4. By that time, the helmet had gained an additional, almost talismanic, meaning for Apollinaire: it had saved his life when he was hit on 17 March 1916 by a piece of shrapnel, which pierced his right temporal lobe and would have killed him immediately had his helmet not slowed it down. Days after being wounded, Apollinaire asked his *marraine de guerre* ("war godmother"), an aspiring poet, to compose "un petit poëme sur mon casque" ("a little poem on my helmet"), which she did, calling it "Sur le casque qui préserva du trépas le porte-lyre Guillaume Apollinaire" ("On the Helmet That Saved from Death the Lyre Bearer Guillaume Apollinaire" [Letter to Jeanne-Yves Blanc 151]).

5. These idioms are explained in the translation below.

6. Apollinaire sent a copy of *Case d'armons* ("Flutchel") and the third issue of *Tranchman' Echo* ("Echo of the Trench Man"), in two separate letters, to Charles de la Roncière at the Bibliothèque nationale. The first letter is not preserved but is referred to in the second letter (Letter to Charles de la Roncière).

7. The poet contributed the poem "Du coton dans les oreilles" ("Cotton in Your Ears") to *Les imberbes* ("The Unbearded"), the poem "On les aura!" ("We'll Get Them!") to *Le rire aux éclats* ("The Roar with Laughter"), and a prose piece called "L'hommage aux morts: Alan Seeger" ("Homage to the Dead: Alan Seeger") to the *Bulletin des écrivains* ("Writers Bulletin"). For his journalism on the trench press in the *Mercure de France*, *Europe nouvelle*, and *Les arts à Paris*, see "Les journaux de tranchée italiens" ("The Italian Trench Journals"), "La Ghirba," Note, "Histoire d'une gazette du front" ("History of a Trench Journal"), "Sur la mort de René Dalize" ("On the Death of René Dalize"), and "Gazette Cormon-Collin-Flameng."

8. French trench journals were often produced near the front lines through a labor-intensive process in which a master copy was pressed onto a metal tray filled with copying paste. The imprint left in the gelatin was then transferred to separate sheets of paper (Audoin-Rouzeau 24–25).

9. It is likely, as Campa suggested to me, that Apollinaire came to *Brise d'entonnoirs* through a fellow patient at the Hôpital Italien in Paris. Another route might have been the *Bulletin des écrivains* and *L'intransigeant* ("The Intransigent"), a Parisian daily

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in which Apollinaire wrote a column on contemporary art between 1909 and 1914. In its issue of 24 July 1916, *L'intransigeant* comments on *Brise d'entonnoirs*, which had recently received first prize (a stencil duplicator and two silver watches) in the widely publicized Concours des Journaux du Front. That Apollinaire does not comment on *Brise d'entonnoirs* in his (preserved) correspondence doesn't mean that he never wrote for the journal. He was an incredibly prolific writer; Caizergues estimates that the poet contributed to more than 140 periodicals and newspapers in his relatively short career (2: 37).

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Curiosities from the Front

The Helmet

Although everyone knows it, we tend to ignore the real purpose of the helmet. The helmet is in reality a seat: placed upside down on the ground, it serves as a comfortable receptacle and lifts you above the too often muddy soil of the trenches.

Through their ingenuity, soldiers occasionally transform it into a shopping basket: held by the handle (that is, the strap), it is useful for carrying a dozen eggs from the cooperative.[1]

It also serves as a pouch; however, experience has shown that in most cases it is a bit too small. It would not be prudent to entrust it with more than the contents of a soldier's ordinary pocket.

The addition of the helmet to the already complicated equipment of the soldier was an

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embarrassing problem. It was elegantly resolved: we wear the helmet on our heads.

The Mug

It occupies an important place in the soldier's hydrotherapy: everyone knows that the soldier washes himself in his mug. It is also by means of his mug that he frequently (?) offers himself indoor showers.

Shells

Cast-iron ingots piled up in various quantities in crates that thus attain a respectable weight. Taking turns, men have to haul these crates from the rear to the front through endless trenches.[2] The purpose, obvious and easily grasped, is to accustom the soldier to fatigue. Before reaching the front-line trench, the "carrier" has to descend from sharp slopes; climb steep trenches; pass, crouching, underneath bridges threatening collapse; and sometimes venture into tunnels of rugged earth.

One then gets rid of the shells by throwing them over the parapet. That's playing them a dirty trick: they are so aware of this that they burst with anger when they hit the ground.

Duckboards

A kind of trap made up of pieces of wood assembled in the most irregular way and placed on the ground of the trenches. Duckboards accustom the men to walk on rough terrain, to give them a . . . Parisian foot.[3] One often digs a pit underneath the duckboard, which is called a cesspool and retains lots of water. Its goal may be to test the impermeability of the shoe, a superfluous test, for everyone knows that our "pumps" are always absorbing.[4]

Vermicelli Box

In various designs, painted in sky-blue [*bleu horizon*], they are slung over the shoulder.[5] There is no consensus on their original purpose. While some believe them to be appropriate for the transportation of food (hence their name), others prefer to see them as fishing accessories and call them "maggot boxes." As an intermediary solution, everyone has agreed to store their gas masks in them. At any rate, this utensil is increasingly disappearing (hint to collectors of rarities!).

Frisian Horse

With his bristly hair, he seems constantly furious.[6] In fact, he hardly resembles a horse. Rather, he resembles a camel because of his sobriety and easily feeds on brambles, even artificial ones. He does not grow fat on this diet: one can already count his ribs; that will cause trouble for him.

Although he is far from having nickel-plated feet,[7] he does not want to have anything to do with walking. It is on the back of a man that one should take him into combat. For the rest, he maintains his post in a remarkable way; hoisted in front of the trench with the (additional) command forbidding movement, he will let himself be chopped up on the spot.

NOTA.—Readers of *Brise d'entonnoirs* are asked not to mention this journal to the seasoned soldiers in the rear area. They, in effect, could not imagine the existence of these front curiosities at all. With the ardent temperament that we know them by, they would be capable of rushing here en masse, abandoning their posts. Imagine the consequences: 1. It would be a direct blow to National Defense; 2. It would also, and above all, be a serious embarrassment for us; 3. Finally, who knows if these shirkers [*embusqués*], stealing the place of the soldiers in the trenches, would not relegate those unfortunate ones to the rear? None of them would survive such a disgrace. . . .

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The Bulletproof Shield

Placed before a hole, the bulletproof shield only serves to excite the anger of Fritz,[8] who quickly transforms it into a sieve. It is more prudent to leave it in the sap trench.[9] One can also use it to pave the trenches.

Trellis

Trellises are in high demand for making bed slats. For fear that they "bite into your sides," one furnishes them with small mattresses called sand bags.

Logs

The log is nothing short of the perfect shell.[10] It exists in all densities and sizes. The transportation of logs requires, in addition to a rare force, great equanimity, harshly put to the test by the cunning zigzag of the trenches. Too heavy to be thrown at the Germans [*Boches*] like shells, logs are generally used for heating. One sometimes stores them above the trench: they remain there as stock for the next winter. It's odd that we never thought of using them multiple times by lugging them to the rear, from where they would leave for the front . . . and so on.

The Shovel

This tool is used to make the *Boche* practice shooting on a moving target. One places the shovel at irregular intervals above the trench; at this signal, Fritz starts shooting his target.

Bullets fired in this way announce the "rigadoon": (the shovel is balanced alternatively to the right and to the left for a few moments).[11]

The Vermorel Sprayer

The instructions state, "Device to use against gas; must always be available in the trenches."

Some soldiers, believing it to be an error, have wanted to use the Vermorel as a water pump and employ it to dry out dugouts that are always flooded. In the face of the complete failure of this endeavor, one had to confront the facts and take note once again of the endearing oversights of the Administration. Knowing perfectly well that we are flooded with liquids, they insist on protecting us against gases.

Notes

1. Cooperatives were small, makeshift shops where soldiers could buy provisions, set up by the military close to the front lines.

2. This was typically the work of the men in the artillery, the branch of the army in which Apollinaire started his military career.

3. Following the logic of *avoir le pied montagnard* ("having the mountain-dweller's foot") and *pied marin* ("sailor's foot"), *avoir le pied parisien* ("having the Parisian foot") means to be at home in Paris, to know one's way around it and be up to its many challenges. The joke here is that walking on duckboards in the trenches is a balancing act comparable to that of making your way through the cobblestone streets of Paris.

4. The complaint was common at the time. Lewis, for instance, wrote that the "Front Line and a half-mile behind had become a first class quagmire. . . . This great bog was traversed everywhere with duckboard-tracks—otherwise gangways of wood, for people to walk in Indian file. Off the duckboard-track, more often than not, conditions were frankly acquatic" (151). Where possible, soldiers would keep their trench dry by pumping out the water. Apollinaire plays on the double meaning of "pumps," which refers both to the soldiers' shoes and to the water pumps.

5. These boxes were used for storing gas masks. Their color—a kind of light blue, like the sky—was that of the French army uniform and was adopted as camouflage. Elsewhere, Apollinaire wrote that, in the army, getting dressed in the morning meant becoming "invisible" against the backdrop of a blue sky ("4H").

6. The trenches' barbed-wire defenses were named Frisian Horses, because they had been invented in the Dutch War of Independence (Greet and Lockerbie 492). Apollinaire had earlier written a love poem for his fiancée, Madeleine Pagès, entitled "Chevaux de frise" ("Frisian Horses"), which was published in *La grande revue* ("The Big Review") of November 1917: ". . . les chevaux de frise / Que l'on voit partout / Abandonnés et sinistres / Chevaux muets" ("You see them every-

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where / abandoned and sinister / Mute horses" [302; my trans.]).

7. *Avoir les pieds nickelés* ("having nickel-plated feet") means refusing to work, being lazy. This might be a reference to a comic strip well-known at the time, *Les pieds nickelés s'en vont en guerre* ("The Lazy Men Go Off to War"), by Louis Fourton, serialized in *L'épatant* ("The Amazing One") in early 1915.

8. This derogatory term for German soldiers appears in the original text.

9. "Sap trenches" were dug perpendicular to existing trenches so that they jutted out into no-man's-land. They were often used as observation posts.

10. The artillery shells used in World War I could be said to resemble logs.

11. Apollinaire describes the way the shovel, held up above the trench, dances when struck by bullets.

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