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Guillaume Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters*, translated, with commentary by Peter Read. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004. 234p. Bibliography. \$29.95. ISBN 0-520-24354-4.

Review by William Hauptman, Independent Scholar.

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When I was an undergraduate art history student decades ago, one of the first texts I purchased outside of the ones listed for required reading was Apollinaire's *The Cubist Painters*. The edition, which constituted the first volume in "The Documents of Modern Art" series published in 1944 by George Wittenborn, comprised a translation by Lionel Abel and a noteworthy preface by Robert Motherwell. The slender volume was purchased new at \$1.75 and still contains my initial notes in the margins on Apollinaire's flamboyant maxims—"Artists are, above all, men who want to become inhuman"—and comments on modern aesthetics—"I hate artists who are not of their own time"—which struck me as particularly appropriate. After this edition was succeeded by a second expanded version by Bernard Karpel five years later, Apollinaire's criticism appeared mostly in anthologies, but with no new English edition of his major text until this rendering by Peter Read, a distinguished specialist of Apollinaire who teaches at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

Apollinaire is probably little taught in the United States now, although his cult as a professional *avant-gardiste* remains strong in France. His sometimes chaotic poetry, imaginative criticism, artful prose, and, above all, his notions of novelty and inventiveness, have never been out of the limelight. Although he died at the age of thirty-eight in the flu epidemic of 1918, his presence is still corporal, as one can hear Apollinaire in recordings reciting his "Le pont Mirabeau" with his mantra-like baritone rhythms. His short life, too, was the stuff of iconoclastic legend in which myth and reality interlocked, including the circumstances of his birth in Rome. It was widely rumored that Apollinaire, christened Wilhelm-Apollinaris von Kostrowitzky, was fathered out of wedlock by Pope Leo XIII, a fiction the future Apollinaire wisely refused to deny. His irrefutable faculty with words and distinctive artistry became evident with the publication of his first poems in 1901. But it was in his encounters with beacons of bohemian society later—including Max Jacob, Alfred Jarry, André Derain, Maurice Vlaminck, Pablo Picasso, and dozens of others—that Apollinaire found his artistic locus and intent. By 1905, he was writing elegantly and lyrically about Picasso, in 1907 about Henri Matisse, and in 1908, in the preface to Georges Braque's first exhibition, all of which further established his place in the crowded world of Parisian art criticism. His intimacy with Braque and Picasso—he introduced them in 1907—made him a precious eyewitness to the laborious crystallization of Cubism when few supporters were vocal. It was in this context that in May 1913, he published his sometimes rambunctious meditations—part polemic, part Joycean exegesis—*Les peintres cubistes*, a month after his *Alcools* appeared in Paris with all punctuation suppressed.

The strength of Read's new edition is manifest first in the translation itself. It is fluid and judicious and clearly an improved version of all previous efforts. Read's task was not an easy one, since Apollinaire's style was fractional and regularly idiosyncratic, making flowing clarity in another language difficult. Comparing examples from the French text and seeing how Read renders words, phrases, and ideas into palpable English, verifies his authority and stylistic sensitivity. But the author's extensive commentary, comprising almost twice the length of Apollinaire's text, is the overriding *raison d'être* of this edition. His discussions are organized around several sections, the first five of which set the stage. Read provides detailed and informative material on Apollinaire's art criticism before his publication of 1913; his audacious grasp of Cubism in its founding years; the historical genesis of the book itself; its structure

and linguistic style; and how Apollinaire's defense of modernism polarized Parisian art circles. In each of these mini-essays, many less than ten pages, Read's brevity is a virtue. Each reduces its subject to the essentials of the discussion without giving way to the scholar's temptation towards extensive meandering. Notes and citations are kept equally to the point, so that reading each section proves to be stimulating and instructive, made even more agreeable by Read's flowing prose that is neither stagnant nor flaunting.

Even more exhilarating is the second part of Read's commentary which includes a chapter by chapter discussion of Apollinaire's text. Having consulted the original manuscript and different proofs, Read adds immeasurably in elucidating Apollinaire's creative process, discussing the sometimes radical additions he made during the editing process, which in Read's view, "provides a potted history of Cubism" (p. 132), an apt way to describe these aesthetic meditations without diminishing their importance. Read also analyzes Apollinaire's word choices, how they became confused in English translations and the reasons why the translator selected specific words to convey Apollinaire's meanings. Sources for some of Apollinaire's accounts, from Pliny to Nietzsche and Bergson, are equally cited, explaining their significance in Apollinaire's ideology. Read impartially discusses Apollinaire's choices in reproducing the forty-five black and white plates in the original edition—all included here—four each by the ten artists he examines, as well as photographs of Jean Metzinger, Serge Gleizes, Juan Gris, Francis Picabia, and Marcel Duchamp as young, respectable men, to counterbalance the image one might have of the *fauves* who produced such alien styles. Read's critical commentary, written with the force and understanding of a top scholar, can only reinforce our understanding of Apollinaire's text, a compliment to Read whose wisdom shines in every paragraph.

The last parts of Read's pointed discussion relate to auxiliary material, including the critical responses of the press and the artists' themselves: Henry Kahnweiler was openly hostile, Braque remained unconvinced, Picabia continued to be supportive, and Duchamp proved equivocal, because, as he said in an interview later, Apollinaire wrote what came to his mind, sometimes without critical reasoning. Here Read's brevity disappoints, since the critical reaction to such a radical text is of great cultural importance and might have been expanded. Furthermore, even if the bibliography is extensive, the absence of an index diminishes the search for specific references or individuals. But there are a wealth of treats that fascinate and odd facts that jump out of Read's commentary. If there is no mention that Apollinaire was a prime suspect in the theft of the *Mona Lisa*, or that he coined the words "Orphism" and "Surrealism," we still learn, for example, that the first English translation of *The Cubist Painters* appeared in 1922 in *The Little Review*, when serialization of Joyce's *Ulysses* had to be suspended after a court ruled it obscene. Read's conclusion that Apollinaire's text is "often quoted, often misunderstood" (p. 221) rings true, and this edition, the one to have and to read, should do much to correct the situation.

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