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André Masson: Into the 'Humus Humaine'

Charles J. Palermo

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Nothing but the Clouds Unchanged

ARTISTS IN WORLD WAR I

EDITED BY GORDON HUGHES AND PHILIPP BLOM



THE GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Nothing but the Clouds Unchanged

ARTISTS IN WORLD WAR I

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ANDRÉ MASSON (1896–1987) IS BEST KNOWN AS A SURREALIST. While he was, at least during certain important periods in his career, closely associated with the movement and with its leader, André Breton, the most important factors in his development arrived by other avenues. If we consider the central themes of his work – eroticism, violence, and the relation of the self to the universe – we will see that Masson’s participation in the First World War was decisive for his artistic development. As a formative experience, it may well outstrip Masson’s more famous participation in surrealism.

The war interrupted Masson’s artistic training. That training began, formally, in Brussels at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts when he was eleven years old; he continued in Paris at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts. Among the artistic influences on this early phase of Masson’s development were James Ensor, the Nabis, Nicolas Poussin, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, and Medardo Rosso. An early brush with cubism made little useful impression on Masson.¹ Early reading in philosophy was much more immediately profitable for him. He was drawn to pre-

Socratic philosopher Heraclitus and to Friedrich Nietzsche.

In a letter more than twenty years after the war, addressed to his close friend Georges Bataille, Masson wrote with excitement about discovering an explicit con-

nection between his two philosophical heroes. In fact, the discovery of the connection moved Masson to transcribe directly from Nietzsche’s note on the Greek philosopher in *Ecce Homo*:

The *tragic wisdom* was absent – I have searched in vain for signs of it even among the *great* Greek philosophers, those who lived in the two centuries *before* Socrates. I still had some doubt about *Heraclitus*, in whose presence I feel warmer and happier in general than anywhere else. The affirmation of flux *and destruction*, the decisive element in a Dionysian philosophy, to contradiction and strife [Masson writes *lutte*], the notion of *Becoming*, along with the radical rejection of even the concept, “Being” – therein I am forced to recognize in any event that which is closest to me of all that has previously been thought.²

The passage, in addition to uniting Masson’s two philosophical inspirations, demonstrates his deep and important sensitivity to a dialectical notion of ontology. That is, rather than viewing worldly entities as having “being,” Masson (following his heroes) sees them as in perpetual states of becoming. The point is not difficult to grasp. Heraclitus is the philosopher most famous, after all, for pointing out the impossibility of stepping into the same river twice. That is, while one may wade into the Mississippi or the Indus twice, the rivers themselves are not static but rather ever-changing

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channels of flowing water, constantly replenished, never still, never the same. Banks eroding, sediment building, water emptying and emerging—a river may be ancient, but it is truer to say it is better characterized as a process of constant change, of *becoming*, than as a persistent object, with a property of *being*.

This is the view that captured Masson's imagination early on. It was as clear to him as it was to Nietzsche (in the passage Masson copied) that this view of things implied a violence—an ongoing work of destruction—as the bedrock of the world. To affirm life in the world is to affirm the ongoing work of destruction that replaces rivers (and their contents and their banks and their bathers) constantly and relentlessly. Not without reason, then, does Nietzsche equate this becoming with strife.

When the First World War broke out, Masson was on vacation from his studies, staying in Switzerland with friends. While he was there, a convalescing German casualty of war advised him to stay in Switzerland and to avoid returning to France and to military service. War would change even the most fortunate survivors irrevocably. Masson decided in favor of change, of becoming, of destruction.

Masson returned to France, joined the infantry, and saw some of the war's most ferocious battle. He took part in the long, bloody Somme offensive in 1916, which he survived. The following spring, however, he was severely injured in the fight for the Chemin des Dames ridge. The offensive was poorly conceived amid confusion in French political and military leadership. The plan was the brainchild of General Robert Nivelle, who, fresh from success at Verdun, seemed like a logical replacement for Joseph Joffre as commander of the French forces. Nivelle concocted a plan to attack a German salient between Arras and Craonne.³ The British army was to attack one shoulder of the salient while the French attacked the other, forcing the Germans to divide their resources. Once they had pierced the German line, the French and British could exploit their advantage. When, in a brilliant move, the Germans retreated to a more heavily fortified position (the Siegfried, or Hindenburg, Line), Nivelle decided to carry out the plan anyway. It was well known that the plan—even in its details—was no longer secret; yet, even after the primary target of the offensive (the German salient) was removed, Nivelle ordered the attack on the two ridges. The British army gained some territory and kept the Germans engaged successfully for days. The French were not as successful.

The ridge of Chemin des Dames was a difficult target. First, the shape of the ridge itself made it hard to attack: "Whereas the northern side is substantially a straight and solid wall, the southern side is cut by many deep ravines or glens through which brooks pass to the Aisne [river]. On a relief map, the Craonne Plateau suggests a comb with the teeth pointed southward, the spaces between the teeth representing the little valleys."⁴ A combination of natural cover and concrete "pillboxes" concealed a multitude of machine-gun installations, which protected the ridge with interlocking fields of machine-gun fire.⁵ German artillery, positioned atop the ridge, was completely covered. Aerial reconnaissance (and a captured copy of Nivelle's plans) gave the Germans a detailed understanding of the French attack.⁶ The French were forced to approach this natural fortress without cover or surprise.

And yet, morale was high. The United States had just announced its entry into the war. Nivelle's optimism was buoyant (for anyone who did not doubt him). Once

the attack began, though, the French forces flagged almost immediately. Heavy fire stopped the offensive's progress and machine-gun fire mowed down the elite troops at the fore. Thirty thousand French soldiers died. Under the command of the overconfident Nivelle, the French medical corps had prepared for fifteen thousand wounded soldiers. There were one hundred thousand.⁷ One of them was Masson.

Masson's injuries incapacitated him on the battlefield, where medics were unable to retrieve him before nightfall. Stranded and exposed amid fire, Masson spent the night expecting to be killed:

The indescribable night of the battlefield, streaked in every direction by bright red and green rockets, striped by the wake and flashes of the projectiles and rockets — all this fairytale-like enchantment was orchestrated by the explosions of shells which literally encircled me and sprinkled me with earth and shrapnel. To see all that, face upward, one's body immobilized on a stretcher, instead of head thrown down as in the fighting where one burrows like a dog in the shell craters, constituted a rare and unwonted situation. The first nerve-shattering fright gives way to resignation and then, as delirium slips over you, it becomes a celebration performed for one about to die.⁸



FIGURE 1. ANDRÉ MASSON (FRENCH, 1896–1987). *Man and Lioness*, 1939, Chinese ink on blue paper, 42.5 x 55.6 cm (16¾ x 21⅞ in.). New York, private collection.

The relation of Masson's incapacitated body to the night sky and the bursting ordinance above both recalls his interest in the world as a process (sometimes violent, sometimes gradual) of becoming and forecasts his deeply related theme of the individual's mirror relation with the universe. After all, if every being, through some now-incremental, now-catastrophic exchange, is becoming one with the universe, representing the individual means revealing the work of becoming.

This experience supplied Masson with some important iconographical references. As he himself explained — for instance, apropos a drawing of 1939⁹ — an encounter with a dead soldier propped up on his elbows returned to Masson's mind in the form of the Dying Lioness from Nineveh (figs. 1, 2): The drawing, as William Rubin rightly notes, adds an intense eroticism to the image of the dead soldier's frozen pose and the lioness's agony. The lioness is part human (note the pendulous breasts), and the nude male human attacker seems ambiguously poised to assault his victim sexually. Eroticism is a persistent theme — and one that cannot be separated from violence — throughout Masson's mature oeuvre.

Eroticism, in the formulation of Masson's close friend Georges Bataille, ceases to be simply or merely about sexuality in the sense we ordinarily encounter it; rather, it comes to stand for the drama of separation that lies at the core of all reproduction.



FIGURE 2. ASSYRIAN. Dying Lioness. Detail of The Great Lion Hunt, from the palace of King Ashurbanipal, Nineveh, ca. 645–635 bc, bas relief, 160 x 124 cm (63 x 48 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.). London, British Museum.

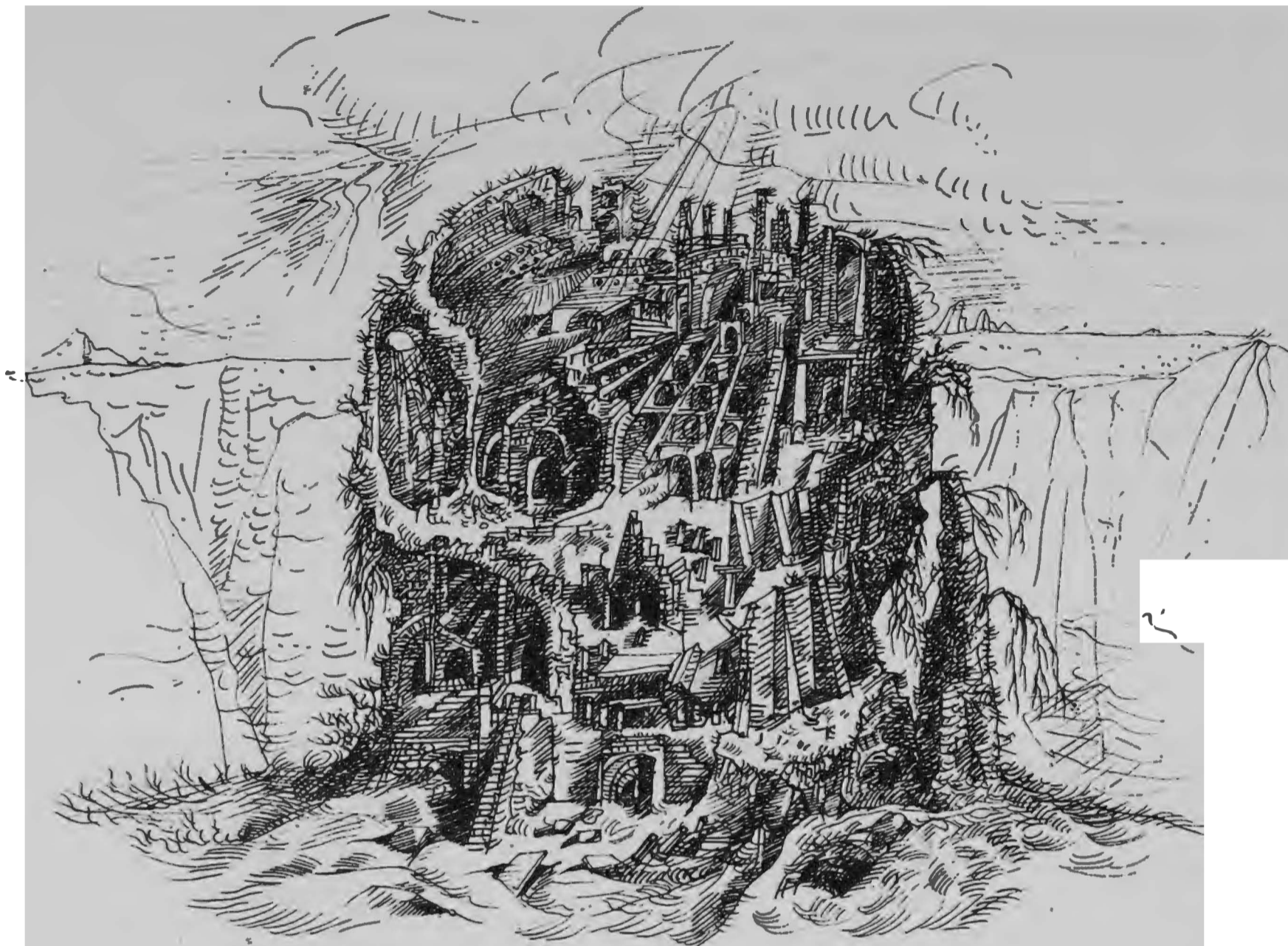


FIGURE 3. ANDRÉ MASSON (FRENCH, 1896–1987). *Skull City*, 1939, ink, 47.9 x 62.9 cm (18⁷/₈ x 24³/₄ in.). Paris, private collection.

As such, it combines the impulse to live with the fact of our difference from each other—one being from the next—that makes violence possible and reveals death’s place in reproduction. A cell divides and is replaced by two, neither of which is the original cell. Eroticism, one might say, shows that the essence of being is destruction, transformation, becoming. Masson also connected eroticism (doubtless in a sense close to Bataille’s) to his automatic drawing.¹⁰ This is not the place to explore the possibility further, but the deep relation of death, parturition, traumatic fear of death in war, and the sort of dissociation that was seen at the time as a condition of automatism was a subject of considerable discussion after the war.¹¹

Rubin also links Masson’s experience of war to a pair of anthropomorphic landscapes that feature central skull-like formations. Rubin connects these to Masson’s observation that Craonne, the name of the plateau on which the Chemin des Dames ridge is located and the name of a nearby town, and Craonnelle, the name of another nearby town, are “strangely cranial.”¹² One of the drawings, in fact, sets the skull-like edifice deep in an elevated ridge (fig. 3).¹³ Several ravines—which must recall the teeth of the comb that Frank Simonds compared to the Chemin des Dames ridge—surround the central space, so that the face of the skull, with its complexes of caverns and stairs,

might be thought of as one of those ravines, filled with the chalk caves and pillboxes the Germans tunneled through and filled with invisible machine-gun emplacements. A true death's-head.

Masson was hospitalized — first for his injuries and then for depression. It is well known that his hospitalization for depression was precipitated by an angry outburst against an officer who treated him abusively. What is less commonly discussed is the relation of this outburst to a widespread mutiny that followed the failed attempt to take the ridge of the Chemin des Dames. Already in March, before the offensive, Nivelles recognized the problems in a note to army commanders. He wrote that he found “in a large number of units a certain lassitude and a hardly satisfactory state of morale. Recriminations are numerous and directed at the most varied subjects: bad food, poverty of clothing, fatigues endured, ignorance or indifference of superiors, duration of inaction.”¹⁴ “Responsibility for this situation,” he added, “belongs entirely to command.”¹⁵ After the offensive, breaches of discipline, organized disobedience, dereliction of duty, and other offenses reached a crisis proportion — involving perhaps between thirty thousand and forty thousand men.¹⁶ Masson's outburst was one of many, part of a general reaction to harsh circumstances, to a sense that the soldiers' sacrifice had been out of proportion to the rewards, and to a crisis of confidence in leadership. After replacing Nivelles, General Henri-Philippe Pétain moved quickly to address the troops' grievances, and the mutinies subsided.¹⁷

After Masson left the army, he joined a generation of young artists marked by the war. The remainder he took away from his service was complex. He was once again representative, rather than extraordinary:

I gave and received blows. . . . If war had had the continuous horror described by Barbusse in *Under Fire* or by Remarque in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, it would have been unbearable. There were compensations, huge compensations. They have since been described time and again by psychologists. There were moments of real happiness, even under fire. There were things which were crudely beautiful to see. . . . The rockets, the smell of the battlefield which was intoxicating. Yes, all that. “The air was drenched in a terrible liquor.” Yes, all that Apollinaire had seen. Only a poet could say that. My God, he even mounted a defense of war. No. It was merely a defense of life in death. He defended peace in war. Because peace within war, that is something. Relaxation, all of a sudden.¹⁸

Masson was both shocked by Guillaume Apollinaire's apology for war and able to join him in appreciating certain features of it.

Returning to civilian life, Masson was told to avoid the stress and stimulation of city living. Instead of following the advice, he moved to Paris and began working intensely, using stimulants to help him cobble together a living for himself and his small family from various jobs. He found a studio in the rue Blomet, where he came to know his neighbor, Joan Miró, and a group of comrades including Michel Leiris, Armand Salacrou, and Roland Tual, and visitors such as Antonin Artaud, Bataille, and others. The little community in the courtyard of the building became



FIGURE 4. ANDRÉ MASSON (FRENCH, 1896–1987). *The Repast*, 1922, oil on canvas, 81 x 65 cm (31½ x 25½ in.). Barcelona, Galeria Marc Domènech.



FIGURE 5. ANDRÉ MASSON (FRENCH, 1896–1987). *Massacre*, 1931, oil on canvas, 120 x 160 cm (47¼ x 63 in.). Berlin, The Ulla and Heiner Pietzsch Collection.

important to all the participants, who referred to it often in later years. Masson made paintings that evoke it. They reveal his inventive appropriation of cubist pictorial methods — cubism’s transparency and destruction of the stable point of view. Yet, as Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, who was the cubists’ and Masson’s dealer, points out, Masson’s world is violent, while the cubists’ knew no death.¹⁹ Even such moments as the evening gatherings in the courtyard of the rue Blomet, however, afforded Masson occasions to reflect on the presence of death. *The Repast* (fig. 4) shows the drowsy revelers arrayed around a pomegranate, which, as Carolyn Lanchner explains, carries multiple significances in its frequent appearances in Masson’s work, including fertility, as a womb, for instance, and death, as the crushed skull of a soldier.²⁰ (Perhaps it is worth adding that the word *grenade* in French names the fruit, pomegranate, and a small explosive shell, such as a hand grenade, which appears on a badge as an element of military insignia.)

Shortly afterward, Masson became a member of the surrealist movement. He was also among the first to be expelled when André Breton forced the issue of political participation. During his involvement with the young surrealist movement, Masson experimented with automatic drawing. Later, his imagery retained a metaphorical association between meandering lines and erotic violence. (Laurie Monahan explains this point with special attention to Masson's *Massacre* of the early 1930s [fig. 5].) These associations — among violence and eroticism and the earth and line, among change and death and life and his own art — remained in force throughout Masson's oeuvre for the rest of his long, productive career. Much of it can be traced back to his traumatic but important experience in the First World War: "The field of battle made a human being of me,' he says. 'It literally threw me into the *humus humain*.'"²¹

– NOTES –

1 Carolyn Lanchner, "André Masson: Origins and Development," in William Rubin and Carolyn Lanchner, *André Masson* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976), 82–83.

2 Masson refers to his source as "Notes" from 1888 "extracted from little-known pages preserved by the Nietzsche-Archiv." See André Masson, letter to Georges Bataille, dated Sunday (June 1936), in Françoise Levailant, ed., *Le rebelle du surréalisme: Écrits*, rev. ed. (Paris: Hermann, 1994), 290. I give the corresponding passage from Nietzsche's note on *The Birth of Tragedy*, §3, in *Ecce Homo* as it appears in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is and the Antichrist: A Curse on Christianity*, trans. Thomas Wayne (New York: Algora, 2004), 51 (emphasis Nietzsche).

3 Michael S. Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War: A Global History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 232–33.

4 Frank H. Simonds, *History of the World War* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page, 1919), 4:142.

5 Simonds, *History of the World War*, 143–44; and Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War*, 241.

6 Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War*, 240–41.

7 Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War*, 244.

8 André Masson, as in Gilbert Brownstone, *André Masson: Vagabond du surréalisme* (Paris: Éditions Saint-Germain-des-Prés, 1975), 29, cited in William Rubin, "André Masson and Twentieth-Century Painting," in Rubin and Lanchner, *André Masson*, 30–31.

9 William Rubin, "André Masson and Twentieth-Century Painting," in Rubin and Lanchner, *André Masson*, 30.

10 Masson, cited in Gilbert Brownstone, "André Masson," in idem, *André Masson* (Milan: Galleria Schwarz, 1970), 24: "Painting requires preparation... however, one must emphasize the aspect of revolt against artistic tradition which is in automatism. As I've already told you, it was a way of turning eroticism, quite simply, into a noble art." Laurie Monahan tells a different kind of story—not necessarily in disagreement with Masson's recollection—in which Masson's use of automatism becomes aligned with a surrealism he refuses *because* it is a merely an artistic revolt, because its art is noble. See Laurie Jean Monahan, "A Knife Halfway into Dreams: André Masson, Massacres, and Surrealism of the 1930s" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1997), chap. 2. For instance (pp. 68–69):

In contrast to the images of the 1920s, the *Massacres* appear to reject automatism insofar as a premeditated and figurative subject is plainly presented: in both the paintings and the drawings of the series, bodies are clearly delineated, each act of violence legible. Erotic violence, struggle—these are *secured* through figuration, as though Masson has turned away from representing the unconscious as a *process*, electing instead to picture what the unconscious—as pure libido, stripped of "civilized" trappings—might look like. If automatism provided Masson with the means to represent or replicate the unconscious *process*, figuration would fix a consciously conceived image of the unconscious self.

11 See Ruth Leys, "Traumatic Cures: Shell Shock, Janet, and the Question of Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 4 (1994): 623–62, esp. 633–34.

12 Rubin, "André Masson and Twentieth-Century Painting," 31; citing Jean-Paul Clébert, *Mythologie d'André Masson* (Geneva: Cailler, 1971), 22.

13 Rubin, "André Masson and Twentieth-Century Painting," 33.

14 *Les armées françaises dans la Grande Guerre*, tome 5, vol. 2, volume of annexes 1 and 16, cited in Guy Pédroncini, *Les mutineries de 1917* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), 51 (translation mine).

15 Pédroncini, *Les mutineries de 1917*, 51.

16 Pédroncini, *Les mutineries de 1917*, 308.

17 Pédroncini, *Les mutineries de 1917*, 311; and Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War*, 248.

18 Georges Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec André Masson* (Marseille: Ryôan, 1985), 38–40 (from a radio interview of 1957), cited in Annette Becker, "The Avant-Garde, Madness, and the Great War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 1 (2000): 72.

19 Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, "Preface," in *André Masson*, exh. cat. (New York: Buchholz Gallery, 1942), n.p., cited in Rubin, "André Masson and Twentieth-Century Painting," 15.

20 Lanchner, "André Masson: Origins and Development," 93. Masson describes such a sight himself in a later piece of writing that reflects on his intellectual development: "As an adolescent, I have seen among the casualties of combat a shattered skull: a ripe pomegranate and blood on the snow design the scutcheon of war. Later in the solitude of the Alps, I discovered the flight of the eagle tracing its perfect geometry in filigrane on the arena of heaven. The secret world of Analogy, the magic of the Sign, the transcendence of Number were thus revealed to me." André Masson, *Anatomy of My Universe* [1940] (New York: Curt Valentin, 1943), prologue, section v.

21 Brownstone, *André Masson: Vagabond du surréalisme*, 15, cited in Rubin, "André Masson and Twentieth-Century Painting," 31.