

**Wolfgang Paalen: *Implicit Spaces*.** Frey Norris Gallery, San Francisco, May 17 - July 12, 2007

### Slow Burn: Wolfgang Paalen in Context

Wolfgang Paalen's (1905-1959) career fluctuated among various places, states, and incarnations. André Breton deemed him 'Un homme à la jonction des grands chemins,' and his paintings' forms, too, appear constantly at a crossroads: between surrealism and abstraction, embodiment and dissolution, a corpulent biomorphism and an imagery from which the human is singularly evicted. *Starscape*; *Flight of Mosquitoes*; *Cosmogon*: these titles alone convey the pith of Paalen's pictorial universe – a world in flux, coming into being, into presence, but never fixed or firm. A cogent show of nineteen paintings and two drawings at the Frey Norris Gallery (specializing in works by some distinguished surrealist artists, largely women painters), has managed to seize, for a brief moment, some exemplary products of this elusive animal. The modest selection from Paalen's oeuvre offers a gratifyingly synthetic overview of his contributions to mid-century modernism. Even in the limited number of pictures on view, the striking range of scale and size, material and method, attests to Paalen's adaptability as a painter. But does his versatility suggest – like the fugitive and shifting forms of his imagery – a certain capriciousness, or else the many manifestations of an unswerving intellectual enterprise?

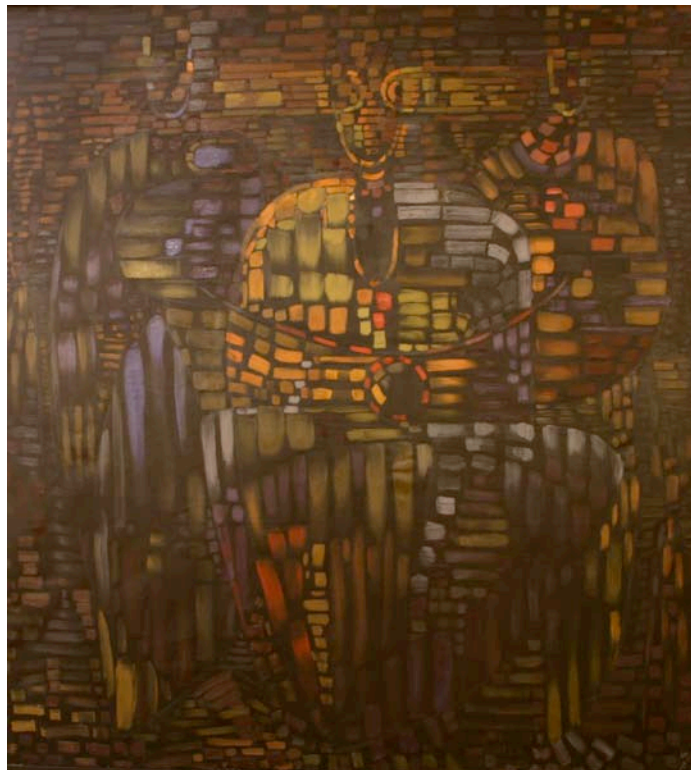


Fig. 1: Wolfgang Paalen, *Hamnur Trilogy*, 1947, oil on canvas, 203 x 190 cm (79.9 x 74.8 in), Private Collection, San Francisco. Photograph courtesy Frey Norris Gallery, San Francisco.



As one of Paalen's most meticulous expositors, curator Andreas Neufert clearly sympathizes with his subject. The author of a comprehensive catalogue raisonné on the artist, Neufert has delved deep into the biographical and philosophical particulars that inform Paalen's trajectory as an artist. A figure of truly international stature, the Austrian-born Paalen proved a vital link between the avant-gardes of the early part of the century – including the last Parisian gasp of surrealism – and their subsequent reincarnations in North and South America. As a resident of New York, California, and Mexico during the 1940s, Paalen played a considerable part in introducing avant-garde currents across the Atlantic. Among the first prominent European artists to emigrate to New York City, his exhibitions at the Julian Levy Gallery and the Gallatin Museum of Living Art, along with a major show in Mexico City in 1940, established his presence as a hinge between the old world and the new. His 1942 essay, 'Farewell to Surrealism,' signaled his break with Breton's stagnating dogma, and cemented his influence upon the burgeoning school of New York abstraction. On view here are works from nearly all periods from Paalen's multifarious career, with the exception of his first pictures from the 1920s (such as his sophisticated still lifes in the style of synthetic cubism) and the mid-1930s (in the vein of the Abstraction-Création group).

Breton once lamented that Paalen referred to his own work as 'non-figurative' – a denomination that Breton saw as giving short shrift to the unsung reality of painted half-truths. The 'interior model' was, for Breton, the only mark and measure of truth; the empirical veracity of figurative sense, then, counted for very little. He took pleasure in claiming the most unstable and unsteady of images as the bedrocks of surrealist intent, yet insisted that they remain 'images.' Utter abstraction did not interest him (he viewed it as counterrevolutionary). Yet here, too, the politics of orthodoxy were contested: to wit Alberto Giacometti's expulsion from the group in the late 1930s after he returned to sculpting from human models. It is surely Breton's ambivalence about abstraction that encouraged and sustained the biomorphic, quasi-figurative tendencies that held sway over painting for so much of the 1930s and 1940s.

Paalen was no exception to this, at least through the late 1930s. One of Paalen's primary anthems – 'no painting with a subject and no painting without a theme' – gives a good sense of his studied ambivalence. In his refusal to jettison subject matter *tout court*, while simultaneously rejecting mimesis, Paalen risked a certain figurative faint-heartedness – a hesitation to sever form from some sort of embodiment, however tenuous (akin, perhaps, to what Clement Greenberg would later call 'homeless representation'). Neither a return to anecdotal order, nor an embrace of abstraction outright, Paalen's imagery remained, for at least ten years, in a kind of purgatorial stand-off between figure and pure form. This vacillation produced a number of somewhat derivative works – whether in the vein of Max Ernst's canvases, Yves Tanguy's mindscapes, or any number of surrealist fellow travelers from the 1930s evoking partially adumbrated figures in



partially adumbrated landscapes. In other cases, however, it led to some of Paalen's most incisive, innovative contributions to modernism, particularly his developments of *fumage* to more unapologetically abstract ends. Some notable examples of the latter are on view here.



Fig. 2: Wolfgang Paalen, *Taches Solaires*, 1938, oil/fumage on canvas, 129.5 x 99 cm (51 x 39 in.), Private Collection, Munich. Photograph courtesy Frey Norris Gallery, San Francisco.



As its name would suggest, the technique of *fumage* employs smoke. *Fumage* performs a kind of stylized violence on its support, whether canvas, cardboard, or paper. Paalen typically passed a burning candle under an overturned, blank surface, blindly recording its ashen residues. After fixing the random traces left by smoke, Paalen would paint over certain areas, emphasizing forms and drawing out latent imagery. The use of unorthodox techniques to create chance imagery was not without precedent in surrealism. Since 1925, Max Ernst had used *frottage*, in which he laid paper over grainy surfaces and rubbed graphite over them to produce a field of random impressions. He then partially edited these forms into semi-recognizable shapes or forms. Oscar Dominguez, too, had further developed the method of *decalcomania* in the mid 1930s, using gouache pressed between two planes to leave a squashed and wrinkled surface, brimming with potential images.

While verbal automatism had been one of the bedrocks of surrealist doctrine since Breton and Philippe Soupault's *Magnetic Fields* (1919), these methods – following André Masson's aleatory sand paintings, and even Victor Hugo's improvised ink washes – sought to grant visual media an equally valid purchase on the unconscious (one more immediate and authentic, say, than the deliberate enigmas of Giorgio de Chirico and his imitators). But the *ex posteriori* editing of this imagery calls into question the 'purity' of pictorial automatism – its attempted proximity to 'pure psychic automatism' (in Breton's terms). The questionable uniqueness of Abstract Expressionist genius – which would later spur Robert Rauschenberg's satirical spoof in his *Factum I* and *Factum II* (1957) – was preceded by similar problems in surrealist automatism. Indeed, the two nearly identical version of Paalen's *Combat of the Saturnian princes (I and II, 1938; not in the present exhibition)* could hardly beg this question even more.

That said, Paalen's *Ciel de pieuvre (Octopus Sky)* still arrests any visitor to this show [fig. 3]. Its hulking figure is at once creepy and lovely, and stands as an excellent representative of Paalen's mature *fumage* experiments from 1938. By 1937, surrealism could no longer avoid the specter of Fascism and, in Paalen's work – as in that of so many of his peers – mounting political anxiety becomes metaphorized as a pictorial problem. Like his *Tache Solaires* [fig. 2] of the same year, *Ciel de pieuvre* recalls Max Ernst's *Angel of Hearth and Home* (1937), a similarly hybrid creature that appears all too human even in its menacing monstrosity. Paalen's *Untitled (fumage)* of 1940 eschews not only the titular specificity of his large *Ciel de pieuvre* from two years earlier, but also the latter's recourse to some sort of figure-ground schema. Both canvases are made with oil and *fumage*. But *Ciel de pieuvre* wants it both ways: a transparent improvisation, and a tentacular knot of labored impasto; an automatic image, and one self-consciously wrought into being by hand; a wraith-like shadow unto itself, and a figure substantial enough still to cast, in turn, its own shadow (look at the inky form billowing at the bottom right).





Fig. 3: Wolfgang Paalen, *Ciel de pieuvre*, 1938, oil/fumage on canvas, 97 x 130 cm (38.2 x 51.2 in.), Private Collection, Berlin. Photograph courtesy Frey Norris Gallery, San Francisco.

The show's 1940 *Untitled (fumage)* – in my opinion one of Paalen's most graceful and striking *fumage* works – is freed from such double duties, in both name and appearance. It pursues only its own forms, forms that have not been redacted into heavy-handed ambivalence. The marriage between oil and smoke here appears more natural, more organic. It is less bent upon convincing us of 'latent' figuration. If these strange forms metamorphose – however fleetingly – into something uncannily familiar, they do so less solicitously. By turns lumpy and smooth, gnarled and wispy, the shapes compel attention through the humble beauty of their impermanence and fragility, rather than any portentous teratology. This is not to champion a facile, inexorable march towards abstraction after 1940 (and thereby to diminish any aspect of Paalen's work that swerved from this tendency). It is, rather, simply to suggest that his work is most convincing when it does not seek to importune us of its strangeness. When Paalen's hand intervenes less tendentiously, his *fumages* truly come alive. His *Vol de moustiques (Flight of Mosquitoes, 1938)* again imports a rhetoric of nature as a guide to the canvas's imagery, but the use black and white ink to underscore the *fumage's* buzzing traces is somewhat clumsy.





Fig. 4: Wolfgang Paalen, *Untitled (Fumage-Encrage)*, 1938, watercolour, gouache, ink, and candlesmoke on cardboard, 62 x 33.2 cm (24.4 x 13.1 in.), Private Collection, San Francisco. Photograph courtesy Frey Norris Gallery, San Francisco.



*L'autophage (fulgurites)*, another oil/*fumage* work from the same year, however, is stunning in its humble simplicity. The work's dual title here perhaps points to the tension between representation and formal autonomy in Paalen's oeuvre. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s he grappled with the tension between forms that imitate something else (whether 'fulgurite' or other natural elements - animal, vegetable, mineral), and 'autophagous' form: form that consumes itself – in other words, an image in which paint is accountable only to paint, not to some extra-material, extra-pictorial metaphor. In this tiny, delicate work of cardboard over wood, the paint and smoke merge subtly, emphasizing the dry transparency of the surface. Of all of Paalen's *fumages* included in the show (and perhaps in his oeuvre at large), this work distills most poignantly the essence of smoke as a smoldering trace. With its delicate *sfumato* (quite literally) of black, white, and shades of gray, *L'autophage (fulgurites)* conjures up something of the photograph – of the *look* of a photograph, without its attendant empirical evidence. Here the roiling surface of other oil-*fumage* combinations (such as its contemporary *Untitled (fumage)* of 1938, hanging nearby) is tamed to a slow burn. The work seems almost a snapshot of billowing smoke – stirring up, in turn, a host of visual and semiotic questions. Just as photographic images have been theorized as a direct, indexical traces of light on sensitive paper, so too candle smoke leaves its traces directly upon a surface. In its ascetic simplicity, *L'autophage (fulgurites)*, sets into motion a playful tension between staged iconicity and immediacy, image and materiality. Here again, the piece seems most chillingly ambivalent because Paalen's hand in its making is so concealed.

Paalen's work in the mid-1940s – exemplified in the show's *Les cosmogones (stage)* (1943) [fig. 5] and *Starscape* (1945) – turned with increasing frequency to astral and scientific metaphors. As his various writings attest, Paalen wanted to redress aesthetic capriciousness with pictorial discipline, rooted in more precise theories of space, consciousness, and science. After the literary interludes of surrealism, numerous painters had taken up again the problem of how to update pictorial space after the changes wrought by cubism. Like many of his peers, Paalen drew significant parallels between the 'the new space' opened up by early modernism and 'the new mathematics' simultaneously being developed in other circles. But it is often precisely where Paalen strives to strike a more technical note that his pronouncements – like his evocations of cosmic spaces – end up seeming more numinous. There is, in his paintings from the 1940s, a good deal of conceptual ebb and flow between hard mathematics and mysticism. In visual terms, the canvases often exceed or fall short of the metaphysics they seek to evoke or embody. In any case, Paalen's imagery, titles, and writing still tap into a familiar store of modernist tropes: infancy, totemism, the liberating irrationality of nature, mythical archetypes. 'Nothing will ever be more moving,' writes Paalen in 1944, 'than the intimate conversation between man and animal in the totemic dawn....'<sup>1</sup> For all of Paalen's desire to merge art and science, there remains more than a faint whiff of New Age mysticism about his work.



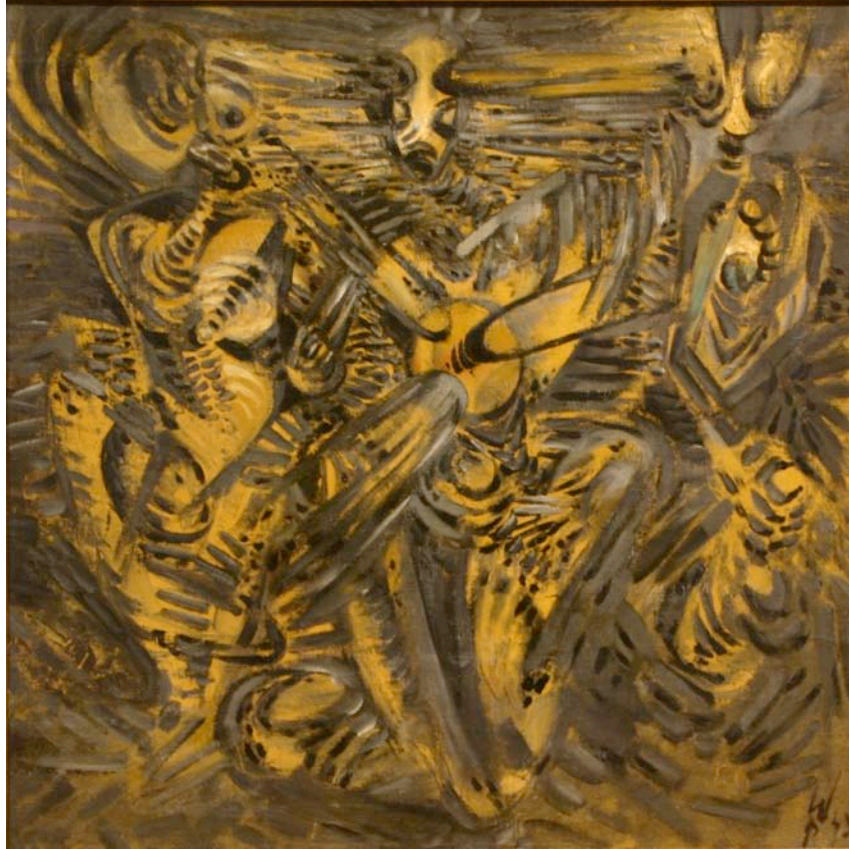


Fig. 5: Wolfgang Paalen, *Les cosmogones (stage)*, 1943, oil on canvas, 65 x 65 cm (25.6 x 25.6 in.), Private Collection, San Francisco. Photograph courtesy Frey Norris Gallery, San Francisco.

However, unlike many artists of his generation, who expropriated the so-called primitive and the primal with bald – often ignorant – opportunism, Paalen pursued his anthropological and scientific interests seriously. His vocation as a theorist and critic in this regard made him a frequently magnetic organizer of individuals and tendencies. The show is thus fittingly rounded out by the inclusion of texts by Paalen and his contemporaries: catalogue essays by Octavio Paz and José Pierre, original prints of the journal *DYN* (which Paalen founded and edited), and first editions of Paalen's other writings. It was, in fact, in his role as editor of *DYN* that Paalen left his most lasting mark in the United States. Published in English and French, and widely circulated in New York and Mexican circles, *DYN* emerged as one of the foremost mouthpieces of theory and criticism during World War Two. It presented recent painting by Jackson Pollock, Roberto Matta, and Harry Holtzman alongside extensive essays on the art of the Pacific Northwest and Pre-Columbian sculpture, as well as sophisticated texts by Paalen on the legacy of Cubism and Robert Motherwell on the state of surrealism. Short for *tó dynaton* – which translates from the Greek as 'that which is possible' – the clipped shibboleth '*DYN*' encapsulated Paalen's investment in painting as a wellspring of latent possibilities. Like the condensation of the



evocative word *dynaton* into *DYN*, Paalen's art sought to abridge the visible world into something less explicit, and thus more concentrated with lyrical potential and allusion.

Not that this constituted something unprecedented in avant-garde painting. 'The least fact, for the poet,' wrote Guillaume Apollinaire in 1917, 'that is the postulate, the starting point of an unknown immensity in which the flares of multiple significations shine.'<sup>2</sup> As the tireless assailant of mimesis in art, in favor of pure plasticity and musicality, Apollinaire was among the first to insist upon abstraction as 'the least fact' of painting: a basic postulate that condenses and concentrates lyrical possibility. Indeed, was not all of modernism since (at least) the poetic work of Stéphane Mallarmé bound up with the renunciation of the 'explicit,' whether of figuration or tonality, of meter or punctuation? Modernism's endless internecine quibbles flared up around the precise form, as it were, that lyrical vagueness should take. Paalen's devotion to the 'non-dimensional vagueness of implicit possibility' – such as his polemics with Roberto Matta over how pictorial space could evoke such possibilities – forms an important chapter of this modernist narrative. Paalen's previous presence in the Bay Area, too, finds an appropriate homage here at the Frey Norris. For it was in San Francisco in 1950 that Paalen and three other colleagues launched the short-lived movement *Dynaton* – a last attempt to revivify the moribund surrealist movement.

While none of his *Dynaton* images are on view here, we do find some works that immediately followed in the wake of the movement's quick dissolution. As he continued painting in the 1950s – before committing suicide in Mexico in 1959 – Paalen turned back to some significant luminaries of German modernism. Canvases such as *Untitled (fumage)* (1953) and *Bureau de longitude* (1953) evoke the quasi-calligraphic sallies of Paul Klee, while *Béatrice perdue* (1953) [fig. 6] unmistakably recalls Wassily Kandinsky's *Improvisations* and *Compositions* from 1910 to 1912. Before dedicating themselves unreservedly to more strictly abstract visual economies, both painters (whom Paalen met personally in Europe before he emigrated at the outbreak of World War Two) had negotiated an ambiguous terrain between figuration and abstraction. It is to the latter exercise which Paalen returns here. Rather than manipulating pure form, he deploys black outlines to two simultaneous ends: they serve alternatively as outlines that delimit shapes, or as autonomous, gestural forms in their own right. The rhythmic alternation of horizontal and vertical lines in *Bureau de longitude* sustains the canvas's panoramic, lateral unfurling, erecting a skeleton on which Paalen hangs swaths of fleshy color. As when it emerged in Kandinsky's early canvases, the ambivalence between figuration and pure form appears less as a vague, disembodied organicism, than a controlled examination of how line, plane, and color interact on the picture plane.



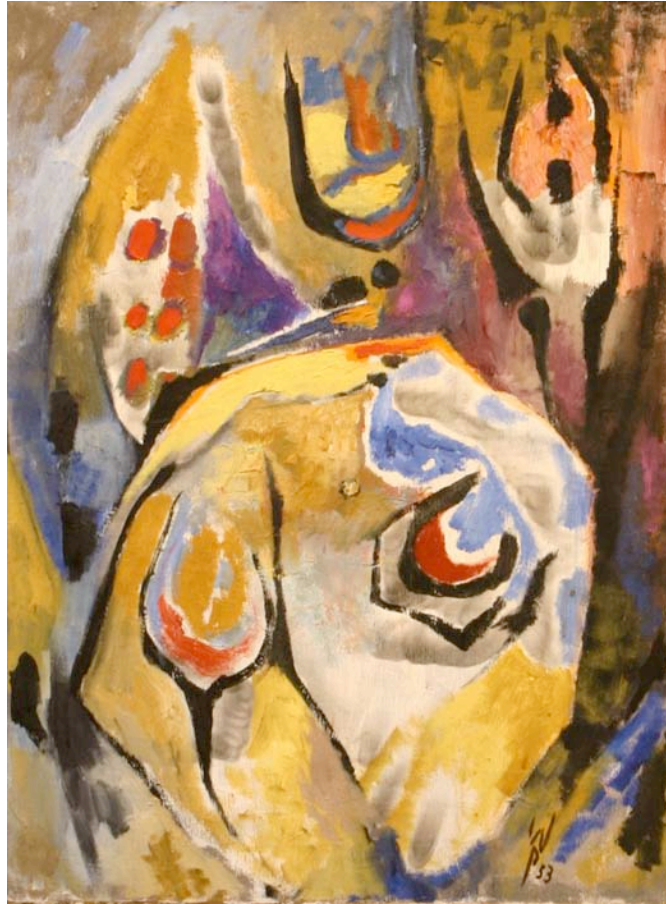


Fig. 6: Wolfgang Paalen, *Béatrice perdue*, 1953, oil/fumage on canvas, 81 x 60 cm (31.9 x 23.6 in.), Private Collection, San Francisco. Photograph courtesy Frey Norris Gallery, San Francisco.

With this return to Klee and Kandinsky, Paalen has taken his painting back to the primal scene of modernist abstraction – the eminent precedent to the processes that were occupying painters at mid century. To a certain extent, the stand-off between figuration and abstraction in contemporary works by Pollock, Mark Rothko, William Baziotes, and others represented a latter-day reprisal of events in European painting during the early 1910s. Paalen's work notes this precedent, insists upon it, while contributing to its development by a younger generation. These 1950s works are less absolute in their renunciation of representation – compared, at least, to the work of painters that Paalen had significantly influenced by this time: Pollock, Clyfford Still, and Robert Motherwell, among others. But these are competent and confident canvases. They push further the dialogue between oil and *fumage*, linear solidity and colored evanescence. His *Untitled* gouache from 1954 is a less felicitous revisitation, invoking Kandinsky's kitschy self-pastiche in which the lyricism of abstraction has been rendered matte and mannered.





Fig. 7: Wolfgang Paalen, *L'enclume*, 1952, oil on canvas, 135 x 190 cm (53.1 x 74.8 in.) Private Collection, Germany. Photograph courtesy Frey Norris Gallery, San Francisco.

Still, Paalen's work never stagnated for long. *L'enclume* (*The anvil*, 1952) [fig. 7], a massive work on unprimed canvas, reveals that his exploration of pictorial space led him constantly to reappraise his working method. He did not remain stubbornly wedded to experiments with *fumage*, but rather updated his materials and scale; the painting's looming dimensions and passages of ad hoc coloration clearly respond to contemporary innovations by his peers. This response comes across very much on Paalen's own, lyrical terms. *L'enclume* evokes the visual vacillations typical of his entire body work: forms that shift between self-sufficient gesture and a figure-ground schema; improvised spontaneity set off against a basic, structural premise; hints of bodies and landscapes, along with shapes unhinged from any anecdotal specificity. But the painting strives to open up the tightly-woven density of his pictures past. *L'enclume* seeks not just to show another space and its possibilities, but also to plunge us in it. Even here, then, where his career ends, we find Paalen at a notable crossroads.

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<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Paalen, 'On the Meaning of Cubism Today,' *DYN*, no. 6, June 1944; reprinted in Wolfgang Paalen, *Form and Sense* (New York: Wittenborn and Company, 1945) 30.

<sup>2</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, 'The New Spirit and the Poets,' translated and reprinted in Henri Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); originally published as 'L'Esprit nouveau et les poètes,' *Mercure de France* 130 (December 1, 1918).

