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"Painting and War Don't Go Together": Images and the Unarticulated Affect in Rose Macaulay's Non-Combatants and Others (1916)

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RÉSUMÉ. Écrit dans la seconde moitié de 1915 et publié en 1916, au milieu de la Première Guerre Mondiale, *Non-Combatants and Others* de Rose Macaulay parle de l'impuissance des non-combattants, ou peut-être de leur réticence, lorsqu'il s'agit de se rendre compte de l'expérience véritable du front – un espace qui reste absent du roman. Des images de la guerre apparaissent cependant sous la forme de visions du champ de bataille et des tranchées, d'un réalisme brutal, et sous la forme de nouvelles du front et d'affiches de propagande sur les murs de Londres. Ces images déclenchent de violents affects accompagnés de fortes réactions corporelles chez le personnage principal, une étudiante en art qui en devient incapable de peindre. Ces réactions peuvent se lire comme ce que Lyotard appelle « phrase-affect » : toujours « inarticulée », elle interrompt les discours incessants des non-combattants sur la guerre. En transcrivant l'affect, Rose Macaulay crée des formes et des métaphores qui témoignent des paradoxes et de la violence de son temps. Cette recherche d'une nouvelle esthétique lui permet de prétendre à une place privilégiée à la fois au sein du canon de la littérature de la Grande Guerre, et en tant qu'auteur moderniste.

ABSTRACT. *Written in the second half of 1915 and published in 1916, in the middle of World War One,* Non-Combatants and Others *by Rose Macaulay registers the reluctance of non-combatants to acknowledge the true experience of the battlefront, which remains absent from the novel. However, images of war do appear in the novel in the form of vivid and bluntly realistic visions of the battlefield and the trenches, and in the form of war news and propaganda posters that cover the walls of London. Images of war trigger violent affect and subsequent bodily reactions in the main character, a woman and art student who consequently becomes unable to paint. These reactions can be read as instances of what Lyotard calls an "affect-phrase", which is always "unarticulated", and which suspends the incessant discourses of non-combatants on the war. Through the attempted transcription of affect, Rose Macaulay tries to negotiate contemporary paradoxes. She invents adequate forms and metaphors that bear testimony to her experience of the troubled times she lived through. Her creation of a new aesthetics fraught with "unarticulated" affect earns her a place both within the canon of First World War literature and within the modernist canon.*

MOTS CLÉS : affect, images, Rose Macaulay, Première Guerre Mondiale, propagande, roman

KEYWORDS: *affect, First World War, images, Rose Macaulay, novel, propaganda, trenches*

Happy are these who lose imagination
Wilfred Owen ("Insensibility" 1918, 37).

According to Ernest Hemingway's 1942 preface to the anthology of war stories *Men at War*, "[t]here was no really good true war book during the entire four years of the [First World W]ar. The only true writing that came through during the war was in poetry. […] The writers either wrote propaganda, shut up, or fought." (Hemingway xiv-xv) The opinion is in line with an "assertion" noted by Andrew Frayn "that there was a ten years gap to realist prose about the war", illustrating Walter Benjamin's idea developed in "Experience and Poverty" that the experience of the war is incommunicable. (Frayn 22) "[W]ritten virtually to the moment" (Boxwell 89) in 1915, well before the war had retrospectively become the "'great casualty' narrative" with its "now stereotypical settings and trappings, in particular the muddy, rat infested trenches of the Western Front, [as] *the* site of the war in Britain's cultural imagination" (Korte ix), Rose Macaulay's *Non-Combatants and Others* (1916) appeared at a time when no retrospective hindsight could be afforded, and no vision of a future.

Rose Macaulay neither "wrote propaganda, shut up, or fought" (Hemingway xv). Like Alix, the main protagonist of *Non-Combatants and Others* (1916), who, to the dismay of her cousins fully involved in the war effort, "only drew" (*Non-Combatants and Others* 3), Rose Macaulay, after serving several months as a VAD nurse in a hospital and observing the effects of the fighting on the bodies and minds of the soldiers, only wrote.[1] Although the seven novels she had already published (as well as the ones she published after the war) were "hugely successful" (Lefanu 4), the cold critical reception of *Non-Combatants and Others*, when it first came out in 1916, has long prevented it from becoming firmly enshrined within the First World War literary canon, like its counterparts also written by women in the same period, Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922) and Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1928), among others.[2] In the same way, Rose Macaulay features, to this day, only marginally in the modernist canon, both as a woman and as a writer who has long suffered from being labelled "middle-brow".[3] Yet *Non-Combatants and Others* was recently republished in 2010 and in 2020, thus attracting renewed critical interest; an Italian translation of the 1916 novel, as well as the first collective volume dedicated to Rose Macaulay's work, *Rose Macaulay, Modernity, and Gender*, also appeared in 2018.

What makes *Non-Combatants and Others* unique as a war text, is that, unlike the bulk of now canonical war novels of what has been called the "War Books Boom

[1] As several critics have noted, her early belligerent aspirations, clearly stated in her poem "Many Sisters to Many Brothers", published in 1914, were crushed by her experience at the hospital. See Lefanu (2010, 7).

[2] See Sarah Lefanu's account of the wartime critical reception of the novel, and of the ambivalence and contradictory statements of the reviewers (Lefanu 2003, 110).

[3] In his influential book *Modernism*, Peter Childs sees Rose Macaulay as an example of "'female' Modernism". (Childs 133). See also Jane Emery's biography (Emery 1991, 155) and Kate MacDonald's recent account of Rose Macaulay's critical reception (McDonald 1-22).

of 1928-30" (Frayn 1),[4] or late 20th century fiction such as Pat Barker's celebrated *Regeneration Trilogy* (1991-1995), it was written and published well before the war ended. *Non-Combatants and Others* was written at a moment when the general patriotic enthusiasm of 1914 was beginning to fade away, and, as trench warfare had just started and the Battle of Ypres was at its peak, disenchantment was starting to take over.[5] Simone Weil wrote in her essay *The Iliad or the Poem of Force* published in 1940 that "war […] expunges the idea of an end to war." (Weil 59) And indeed, *Non-Combatants and Others* ends with the year 1915, with these half-ironic, half-apocalyptic two sentences: "The year of grace 1915 slipped away into darkness, like a broken ship drifting on bitter tides on to a waste shore. The next year began."[6] (*NC* 194) The temporality in which it was written might account for the exceptional vividness and realism of its evocations of the war, and, to some extent, makes it a forerunner of the work of such uncontested war poets as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon.[7]

It is through images of the war in the form of powerful visual flashes brought about through hypotyposis or ekphrasis that the reality of the battlefront breaks into the novel. Even though it is never painted by either Alix – the main protagonist, a woman and an art student – or by her fellow painter Basil Doye, those sudden imaginary visions act as flashes that repeatedly disrupt Alix's life in the sheltered "homefront". Through the violent bodily reactions they trigger in her, all distance is suddenly abolished, allowing for the battlefront to break into the novel. Similarly, Alix's walks in wartime London lead her face to face with war news "paint[ed] out and repaint[ed]" (*NC* 37) on the walls of the city, and with the propaganda posters that stare at onlookers; in her, those signs of war spark an inexplicable fit of laughter, combined with a movement that makes her turn away from the sight. By examining the emotional force that *affects* the body in front of images of the war, whether imaginary or real, I will argue that Alix's excessive bodily reactions, beyond making her a victim of vicarious shell-shock,[8] afford her, and the reader, true knowledge of the war. This paradoxical form of knowledge through the "unarticulated" form of affect, understood as what Jean-François Lyotard calls the "impossibility of phrasing"[9] (Lyotard 2006, 104), is distinct, in the case of Rose Macaulay's 1916 novel, from the sentimentality of which the novel was accused in early criticism.[10] The immediacy and incommunicability of affect are opposed to the novel's over-

[4] See, among others, Ford Madox Ford *Parade's End* (1924-1928) and, from the German point of view, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928).

[5] See Andrew Frayn's discussion and theoretical definition of the term in *Writing Disenchantment: British First World War Prose, 1914-30* (2014).

[6] See D. H. Lawrence's much quoted phrase that stresses the perception of 1915 as a symbolical and historical turning point: "It was in 1915 that the old world ended." (Lawrence 216) I am indebted to the reviewers of this article for pointing that out.

[7] According to Sarah Montin, the cultural fascination for the figure of the war-poet is specifically British: the French tradition of war literature, for instance, is altogether different, being based on autobiographies and novels rather than poetry (Montin 17). Perhaps this may help to account for Hemingway's opinion concerning novels published in wartime.

[8] See, among others, Andrew Frayn who writes of "her kinship with the shell-shocked soldiers" (Frayn 62).

[9] « […] une impossibilité de phraser » (Lyotard 2000, 45).

[10] See Lefanu 2003, 110.

constructed and carefully measured discourses about the war which become inadequate when, in Susan Sontag's terms, "[s]omething becomes real – to those who are elsewhere" (Sontag 2003, 21).

Incommunicable affect and the unpaintable front

It may appear as a paradox that in a 1916 novel whose main character, Alix, is an art student who "does nothing but draw and paint" (*NC* 6) and might therefore seem as an early female counterpart of later war artists, neither she, nor her friend and fellow painter Basil Doye, who is on active service, ever actually paint the battlefield. Indeed, with regard to the memory of the Great War in England, artists such as Paul Nash or Christopher Nevinson have been raised to the rank of legends almost as mythical as the war poets.[11] Yet however omnipresent the war might be in the novel, the narrative never presents a painted, or even a drawn picture of the front. In keeping with the negation and with the indefiniteness of the title of the novel, *Non-Combatants and Others*, which ironically points at a seemingly deliberate, yet impossible attempt to deny an unseen reality, the battlefield remains unrepresentable through the totalizing means of an art picture. It thus illustrates both Walter Benjamin's famous stance that soldiers came back "poorer in communicable experience" (Benjamin 731), and Paul Nash's claim that the front is an "unspeakable, utterly indescribable" experience that "no pen or drawing can convey" (Nash 211).

Instead, despite a frequent insistence on sight – Alix is repeatedly "seeing", "watching", or "narrow[ing] her eyes" (*NC* 5) – Alix hardly paints anything at all. As for Basil Doye, who later emblematically loses two fingers on his right hand, which physically deprives him of his ability to paint, the letters he sends to Alix from the trenches contain diluted wishes of painting a landscape that bears no relevance to the now iconic devastated land that has come to be a symbol of the Great War. He writes instead of "jolly distant ridges, transparent blue and lavender coloured" that he wants to sketch (*NC* 8). Unlike many examples of real-life correspondence between soldiers and the home front at that time, which provide ample description of such landscape despite censorship, Basil Doye avoids using visual terms.[12] Instead, he turns it into a musical landscape, which he ironically compares to a symphony that might be composed with "the different noises the shells make coming" (*NC* 8).

In fact, the only painting by Basil Doye that is ever described through ekphrasis in the novel is one made before the war. After she finishes reading the letter, Alix "twist[s]" it up "into a hard ball" (*NC* 9) and, as if to resist the dangerous affective appeal of the actual, turns to a painting hung on the wall, and to the past, "those old days before 1914" (*NC* 10). In Alix's retrospective contemplation of the painting,

[11] On the parallel between the two forms of war art, see Hynes (33). Viney calls Paul Nash the "artist equivalent of Wilfred Owen" and emphasizes the central role of painting during World War I as opposed to photography, for both political and technical reasons (Viney 44).

[12] See for instance Eric Appleby's 1915 to 1916 *Love Letters from the Front: Letters from Eric Appleby to Phyllis Kelly*.

her yearning for the impossible return to the time before the war exemplifies what Susan Sontag, writing of photography, calls "the generalized pathos of looking at time past" (Sontag 2008, 71). And indeed, this painting of "a grey-green pond, floored with a thin, weedy scum" would have been a fairly conventional bucolic landscape, a "*studium*" according to Roland Barthes (Barthes 48), which triggers a "*medium* affect" (Barthes 48), had it not been for two jarring details which feature in the middle of the painting: a "hole-riddled, battered old tin […] in the middle of it" and the ominous image of "a broken boot […] half sunk in the mud"[13] (*NC* 9). These two "details", that can be read as illustrations of Roland Barthes' "*punctum*" (Barthes 49) and bring the "*stadium*" out of place, seem to foreshadow the waste to come. The painting bears the haunting mark of a past that is irreversibly marred with the seeds of the future.

The feeling Alix experiences in front of this painting from/of the past is one of unavowed mourning for the lost connection with a friend and potential lover, which she reminisces about by enumerating "the real things, the enduring things – green ponds, music, moonlight, loveliness – [which] ran like a choked stream. . . ." (*NC* 10) Yet the disturbing image of the empty abandoned boot, while defeating the pastoral myth of pre-war England that the painting might otherwise have represented,[14] also comes back hauntingly a few pages later when John Orme, Alix's shell-shocked cousin, unknowingly talks during a sleepwalking fit and mentions a leg torn from a body and stuck in the slime. His "impossibility of phrasing" illustrates Jean-François Lyotard's definition of the "affect-phrase": "Feeling is a phrase. I call it the affect-phrase. It is distinct in that it is *unarticulated*."[15] (Lyotard 2006, 104) Indeed, John's experience overflows in the form of uncontrollable affect, not through any form of constructed speech, but through a flow of garbled sobs, which Alix records: "What was it John had said on the balcony – something about a leg. . . the leg of a friend. . . pulling it out of the chaos of earth and mud and stones which had been a trench . . . thinking it led on to the entire friend, finding it didn't, was a detached bit. . . . "[16] (*NC* 20) As an echo to John's *unarticulated* "affect-phrase" that registers the dislocation of both the body and the mind, Alix in turn fails to compose a vision of the front that would be "paintable" (*NC* 5). Her question, "[w]hat sort of pictures would one be painting out there?", never brings her to set to work. Instead, a paradoxically unpainted but nonetheless very blunt picture takes shape through writing:

> Mud-coloured levels, mud-coloured men, splashes of green here and there… and red… And blue sky, or mud-coloured, with shells winging through it like birds

[13] An echo is to be found in Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce Et Decorum Est": "Many had lost their boots/ But limped on, blood-shot." (Owen 55)

[14] See Paul Fussell's comments on the war as "the ultimate anti-pastoral" (Fussell 11).

[15] « Le sentiment est une phrase. Je l'appelle phrase-affect. Elle se distingue en ceci qu'elle est *inarticulée*. » (Lyotard 2000, 45)

[16] Interestingly, this shuddering vision of a "detached" leg found by fellow soldiers on the battleground also appears in very similar terms in Pat Barker's 1991 novel *Regeneration* (Barker 12).

> […] Whizz-bangs, pom-poms, trench mortars spinning along and bouncing off the wire trench roof. . . . Minnie coming along to blow the whole trench inside out . . . (*NC* 20)[17]

Rose Macaulay's page is "scarred by ellipsis and elisions" (Frayn 59) and almost transformed into a visual canvas to be gazed at, as much as read, thus turning the reader into the ultimate recipient both of an impossible description of war, and of an affect that is told through words as much as silences.

Just as this passage is strikingly reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's later use of brackets as traces of affect in her own fictional treatment of soldiers dying on the Western front in *To the Lighthouse* (Woolf 1927, 181),[18] the written picture drawn through Rose Macaulay's own use of the iconicity of punctuation and blanks anticipates by several months paintings by Paul Nash or even Christopher Nevinson.[19] As a substitute for a brush on a canvas, Rose Macaulay's pen uses Alix's subjectivity to perform "pure sensation", something that, according to Deleuze and Guattari, can be achieved through either painting or words (Deleuze and Guattari 157, translation mine). The text registers in its very form the disarticulation of the bodies and of time, and becomes visually torn into shreds. While bearing the mark of Rose Macaulay's engagement with modernist experimentation, it creates, in Deleuzean terms, "a syntax that turns words into sensation, making everyday language stutter, tremble, shout, or even sing"[20] (Deleuze and Guattari 166, translation mine). While Alix tries to perform the impossible task of conceiving a painting and extracting the material for her own art, she finds that finishing, or "phrasing", the sentence is already an impossible thing to do. The unbearable reality of "legs and arms and bits of men flying in the air . . . the rest of them buried deep in choking earth . . . perhaps to be dug out alive, perhaps dead. . . ." (*NC* 20) develops into a more global form than just a brief vision. Yet however vividly depicted through the power of hypotyposis, it never becomes paintable and remains stuck in an impossible, unrepresentable present time in which memory has no place.[21] The trench becomes a haunting textual presence, and is represented as more than a historical scar on the ground: it rather becomes a textual abyss that metaphorizes the disarticulation of time.

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[17] Paul Nash's own description of the battleground in a 1917 letter to his wife is made in strikingly similar terms (Nash 211).

[18] See Catherine Lanone's reading of Woolf's brackets and ellipsis as illustrations of Barthes' *punctum* in her article "Virginia Woolf or the Transparence of Opaqueness" (Lanone 2013).

[19] See for instance Nash's *After the Battle* (1918), or *Wire* (1918), or *We are Making a New World* (1918), or *The Menin Road* (1919), or *The Mule Track* (1918), or *Void* (1918), or Nevinson's *The Harvest of Battle* (1919). It might also be worth mentioning the famous triptych "Der Krieg" ("The War") by German painter Otto Dix.

[20] « L'écrivain se sert de mots, mais en créant une syntaxe qui les fait passer dans la sensation, et qui fait bégayer la langue courante, ou trembler, ou crier, ou même chanter ». (Deleuze and Guattari 166)

[21] In that respect, Alix's experience as a painter in 1915 and the unvoluntary electric flashes brought about by her imagination makes her stand in contrast with her 1927 fictional counterpart, Virginia Woolf's Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*: although she too sees her own picture "[i]n a flash" (Woolf 1927, 115), while sitting at dinner, hers is a slow mental process that lasts several pages, while she is deciding where to move the tree in her picture. (Woolf 1927, 115-138)

Alix's reaction to her own building of a hypnotic vision, which stages death and decay, results in a contamination of her own body: "Alix, seeing her friends in scattered bits, seeing worse than that, seeing what John had seen and mentioned with tears, turned the greenish pallor of pale, ageing cheese, and dropped her head in her hands. Painting was off for that morning. Painting and war don't go together" (*NC* 21). The realism that defeats imagination projects the violence done to the soldiers' bodies onto the body of the viewer. The latter in turn becomes porous to the experience of combatants, despite them being labelled as "others" in the novel's title. In fact, Alix's face bears the features of death through a decaying food metaphor that emphasizes abjection and disgust. In Rose Macaulay's striking image, intensified by the polyptoton, of "the greenish pallor of pale, ageing cheese" (*NC* 21), affect is in fact to be read in the words of Deleuze and Guattari as a "non-human becoming"[22] (Deleuze and Guattari 163, translation mine). Or, in the words of Simone Weil, the paroxystic affect, experienced under what Weil calls "force […] exercised to the extreme", not only deprives Alix of her agency as a painter, but also makes her body fall "to the level […] of purely passive inert matter" (Weil 61) by turning it into "a thing, quite literally, that is, a dead body" (Weil 45).

Signs of war on the streets of London: incongruous affect

If read against *Non-Combatants and Others*, the "force" that Simone Weil writes about in 1940 is not exerted upon Alix solely through the power of her own imagination: the city of London, as the ambivalent place to which women are forcibly confined, yet which at the same time gives them protection from the fighting itself, is staged as the site where contemporary violence is most acutely felt. The city and the front find themselves superimposed through a figurative language that seeks to register the impact of the war on everyday experience: Chancery Lane is seen through Alix's eyes "as some wild lane on the battle front, or like a trench which has been shelled, for the most recent airship raid had ploughed it up. A week ago it had been the scene of that wild terror and shrieking confusion which is characterised by a euphemistic press as 'no panic'" (*NC* 41). Such expressionistic images, metaphors and comparisons transform the city into a menacing and indomitable space where affect, rather than reliable information, prevails: "the wild river of Fleet Street surged. 'Special. War Extra. British driven back. . . .' The cries, the placards, were like lost ships tossed lightly on the top of wild waters" (*NC* 51). London has become a highly unstable, threatening place characterized by unpredictable movement. There, Alix is metaphorically assaulted by "noon war news" that "lea[p] from placards, in black and red and green" (*NC* 36), as though splashing the viewer with their aggressive colours. The violence is expressed in visual terms, while the message itself is conveyed through ironic equivalence: "A mile of trenches taken near

[22] « L'affect n'est pas le passage d'un état vécu à un autre, mais le devenir non humain de l'homme. » (Deleuze and Guattari 163)

Festubert – a mile of trenches lost again. Alix did not care and would not look" (*NC* 36).

The very walls of London serve as a surface where the signs of power are constantly "paint[ed] out and repaint[ed]" (*NC* 37). Ironically, as Alix notes, "sign-painters" have replaced "studio artists", while their uniforms as recruits of the Artists' Rifles have erased any distinction or hierarchy between artists, on the one hand, and mere workmen in charge of sign-painting, on the other hand (*NC* 37). These are no longer the Baudelairian painters of modern life, but the indifferent and unartistic agents of war power, busy turning London into a Benjaminian "landscape in which nothing [is] the same except the clouds" (Benjamin 732). The city becomes a palimpsest that is constantly erased before any coherent pattern can take shape. A relentless production of images takes place, as if through a mad creative process unleashed after the loss of a stable collective experience, which Walter Benjamin theorized retrospectively in 1933:

> […] experience has fallen in value, amid a generation which from 1914 to 1918 had to experience some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world. […] For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly: strategic experience has been contravened by positional warfare; economic experience, by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers. (Benjamin 731-2)

With none of the Benjaminian retrospective hindsight, Alix's own negotiation of the contemporary inconsistencies, this time, is no longer through a reaction of sheer shock and horror. It rather takes the form of an oscillation between perceptiveness and radical exposure, and an attempted distance that would allow for a critical reading: she turns away from a spectacle in which every inch of space is saturated with confusing and unreliable visual signs.

Such oscillation, in turn, impacts her body that, starting with her "swerving eyes" (*NC* 37), seems to reflect, or, in Deleuzean terms, "become", the disjunctions of her time. Two such instances are to be found in her incongruous, and even puzzling reaction when the bus she is riding passes by a recruiting station. She is then put face to face with two of the now iconic World War One propaganda posters: the first represents what, in the novel, is ironically called "the hypnotic stare of the Great Man pictured on the wall" (*NC* 37) – namely Lord Kitchener pointing a compelling finger at the viewer – and the second "the picture in which an innocent and reproachful infant inquires of a desperately embarrassed but apparently not irate parent, 'Daddy, what did you do to help when Britain fought for freedom in 1915?'" (*NC* 38).[23] In front of those two over-explicit and over-simplified images of power in time of war, whose aim is to trigger a very specific, pre-programmed affect in the

[23] See Andrew Frayn's reading of these two posters as "invok[ing] a language of duty which draws on the Christian moral code and vestiges of hierarchical feudal loyalty" (Frayn 43) while emphasizing "a defining shared masculine, patriarchal experience, and […] duty to protect." (Frayn 43-5)

viewer, Alix's reaction in both cases is a wholly inadequate ternary bodily movement as she "turn[s] away, checking a started giggle." (*NC* 37-8)

This incongruous, aborted half-laughter, which barely has time to start before it is repressed in the turning away movement, and remains strangely unexplained in the narrative,[24] has mainly been overlooked by critics who have focused chiefly on Alix's "nervous reactions, her stammers, shivers, illnesses and silences" (Gildersleeve 26). First of all, this laughter should be read, I will argue, as distinct from Rose Macaulay's celebrated wit.[25] Second, it escapes the categories of affect and exceeds the traditional values of laughter theorized by Bergson as related to social performance (Bergson 67). Indeed, uneasy laughter is used elsewhere in the novel, but always in a social context, for instance when Basil Doye tells anecdotes and jokes about life in the trenches and "laugh[s] too much" (*NC* 64). Yet this solitary, unaddressed laughter, which is neither shared nor used as social façade, and does not appear to have any narrative purpose, is altogether different. It is neither caustic nor ironic, and has no clear target, just as Alix, as a woman, is not the direct target of the propaganda posters. Hers is a pure involuntary bodily reaction, an "inopportune, unseemly, and even disquieting" (Lyotard 106) "affect-phrase" that defeats Bergson's statement that "laughter has no greater enemy than emotion"[26] (Bergson 3, translation mine), and that remains unaccountable.[27] Rather, Alix's "giggle", a childish version of laughter, opposes the "unarticulated phrase" (Lyotard 108) it produces to the over-articulated propaganda message, and has the ability to trouble or even threaten the face of power painted on the wall.[28] The compelling stare of the propaganda image that seeks to subject its viewer is, in turn, subjected to the subversive power of laughter that, in the words of Baudelaire, lies "in the one laughing, rather than in the object of laughter"[29] (Baudelaire 23, translation mine). The very precarious nature of Alix's "checked giggle", that sounds proleptic of T.S. Eliot's 1922 line in *The Waste Land*, "The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear" (Eliot 30), unsettles the established symbol of power and reveals in turn its transitory and contingent nature. In other words, her *out of place* laughter has the power to *displace* the structure of power by making it appear a little "out of place" itself.

Affect in this case might be read as a form of unarticulated counter-discourse, not through *logos*, but in the form of an incomplete expression that does not speak the common language, and is akin to the Benjaminian "barbaric" laughter, a

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[24] Debra Rae Cohen writes of an "uneas[y]" "squir[m]" (Cohen 34) in the context of the "oppressive scopic economy" of 1915 as the year of the historical transition between volunteer recruiting and compulsory conscription which started only in January 1916 (Cohen 30).

[25] See Sue Thomas on the "delightful and spirited qualities" of Rose Macaulay's "immensely popular comic novels of the 1920s" (Thomas 93).

[26] « Le rire n'a pas de plus grand ennemi que l'émotion. » (Bergson 3)

[27] However, Debra Rae Cohen writes that Alix "rejects as laughable […] the classic poster that shows a father dropping his eyes" (Cohen 38), which implies judgement and distance.

[28] See the idea developed by Jo Fox that propaganda is "volatile, ambiguous, open to interpretation" and can "provoke independent thought (the antithesis of propaganda's purpose)" (Fox 197).

[29] « La puissance du rire […] est dans le rieur et nullement dans l'objet du rire. » (Baudelaire 23)

paradoxically positive means to survive the end of civilisation (Benjamin 735). Alix's way out of the deadlock of her own uncanny affect is to avert her gaze and direct it towards the only safe space where no images of war are to be endured: "Alix […] looked up at the white clouds racing across the summer sky, where there was no war nor rumours of war." (*NC* 37)

"But Alix knew":[30] knowledge and the value of affect

Rose Macaulay, according to one critic, was "often accused of writing novels as though they were essays" (Fromm 296), even attracting Virginia Woolf's jeering comment that a novel she wrote in 1920 was "'a don's book'" with "'the atmosphere of [a] lecture room'" (qtd. in Fromm 296). In fact, *Non-Combatants and Others* in many respects fits these accusations: a large part of her war novel indeed consists of "rumours of war" (*NC* 37), a hodgepodge of competing discourses, that sometimes do sound like "lecture[s]", as each of the characters is trying to find a coherent posture that would allow them to negotiate the critical paradoxes of the period, and perhaps shield themselves from its fundamental uncertainties.[31] This, however, does not apply to Alix, whose oblique vision puts such discourses at a distance. She never fully commits to any of the prescribed attitudes, and persistently refuses to find refuge in assertions – at least until the ambiguous ending, when she seemingly, and reluctantly, enlists in her mother Daphne's pacifist activism, which has often been read as a sign of the novel's pacifist message.[32]

This incessant *logos*, however, as the title of the novel ironically suggests, does not include "[t]he male combatant" who, according to Carol Acton, "has seen war, when war is defined as combat, and speaks of war from a privileged position. Seeing and its attendant knowledge give him the right to speak" (Acton 55). While Carol Acton's claim here is that women's voices, and not only men's, are also valuable when it comes to wartime experience,[33] in *Non-Combatants* the civilians talk ceaselessly, as if trying to give articulated meaning to current historical events. Yet they generally ignore the traumatic "knowledge" of the soldiers, which radically escapes the categories of traditional knowledge.[34] According to Jessica Gildersleeve's

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[30] *NC* 24.

[31] On non-combatants' discourses on the war in the novel, see Andrew Frayn 61.

[32] See especially D.A. Boxwell who sees Daphne as a "solution to the problem of war" (Boxwell 90) and Andrew Frayn (Frayn 26). Debra Rae Cohen, however, questions that assertion (Cohen 44) and reads the last part as "artificial closure" and a sign of "narrative exhaustion" (Cohen 47). She sees Alix's final embrace of pacifism as a submission to another form of "militarized vision" (Cohen 47), a point of view shared by Jessica Gildersleeve (Gildersleeve 2017, 26).

[33] Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate write that in wartime "ignorance was often figured as feminine" (Tate and Raitt 2). A long-standing critical tradition has excluded women writers from the canon of war literature: Paul Fussell's much-quoted *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), for example, puts forward an almost exclusively male canon. However, later scholarship has endeavoured to draw attention to war literature by women authors. See Cohen, Higonnet, Ouditt, among others.

[34] A knowledge Wilfred Owen seeks to convey in his poem "Dulce et Decorum Est", especially in the last stanza which also stresses the gap between the battlefield and the home front: "If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace/ […] And watch […]/ If you could hear […]" (Owen 55). The lines are addressed to "My Friend",

recent essay, the characters of the novel "work hard to ignore or to elide the obvious suffering of the returned soldiers"[35] (Gildersleeve 2017, 31). Indeed, the silence of the combatants, who in Walter Benjamin's terms "returned from the front in silence" (Benjamin 731), is epitomized in *Non-Combatants* through Basil's bitter jokes, or through Terry Orme's advice, when Alix is accidentally told about her own younger brother's death in the trenches, "not to *think*. Not to *imagine*." (*NC* 102)

Yet the most striking example of such denial lies in the over-explicit, over-articulated, self-censored discourse with which John, the shell-shocked soldier, faces his family. John Orme only presents a composed face and uses euphemisms to disguise the grim reality that nobody really acknowledges despite the pressing questions: "Dorothy wanted to know [...] Margot wanted to know [...] His mother wanted to know [...] His father asked [...]" (*NC* 13). The non-combatants' thirst for "knowledge" is for the facts, not the feelings: sleep, noise, meals, what the Germans are like, religious faith at the front, and politics. The repetitive structure here creates a system of ready-made, automatic answers, "John said […] John said […] John said" (*NC* 13), while the use of indirect speech does not allow for the true voice of the soldier to be heard. Only his eyes and shaky hands betray his emotional state, while his stammering defeats the articulation of his discourse about the war.[36] Alix is the one character who seems to "see" and to "know": "Alix noticed how cheerful and placid he looked, and how his hand, holding his pipe, shook. […] His memories lay behind his watchful eyes, safely guarded. But Alix knew" (*NC* 24). Alix's "knowledge" here has no definite object, and silently refers to what cannot be spoken, but only uttered through unconscious "crying, sobbing, moaning" (*NC* 18) in a sleepwalking crisis. It is the latter form of unarticulated discourse that triggers Alix's indirect and fragmentary vision of the battlefront – another "affect-phrase" which, according to Lyotard, is "non-destined"[37] (Lyotard 2006, 108).

In this 1916 novel, *knowledge* seems to abdicate its traditional value and become, instead, another word for *affect*.[38] It thus breaks the traditional boundaries between those two terms, which have often been opposed by the notion that affect is what suspends and challenges previous knowledge.[39] The apparition of shock images, that

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that is, the poetess Jessie Pope, who wrote propaganda. I am indebted to the anonymous reviewers of this article for pointing that out.

[35] According to Rose Macaulay's biographer Sarah Lefanu, this is something she herself experienced as a VAD nurse: "the nightmare was […] of dismembered bodies and shattered minds bearing witness to a civilisation that preferred not to hear their testament" (Lefanu 2003, 107).

[36] See Virginia Woolf's later staging of the discourse of the shell-shocked soldier Septimus Smith in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). Catherine Lanone analyzes the novel's staging of a patriotic discourse that claims that it is celebrating the former combatants, while at the same time denying the trauma of the First World War. (Lanone 2013)

[37] « La phrase-affect est dite non destinée. » (Lyotard 52)

[38] It is perhaps worth noting that there is an ongoing debate about affect in cognitive sciences and history with research projects that seek to develop an approach to emotions through positive scientific knowledge. See for instance *The Handbook of Cognition and Emotion*, or the "Emotion and Motion" project, as well as the Research Center "History of Emotions" in Germany.

[39] The dominant idea that the First World War was "nothing if not an experience of radical discontinuity" (Leed 3), or "A Gap in History" (Hynes ix), has recently been questioned by Andrew Frayn as one more myth about the Great War (Frayn 6). While in *Non-Combatants* the incessant discussions about the war illustrate the theory of

present the emergency of the 1915 temporality to the face of the reader, within an otherwise verbose narrative, plays a crucial role in mediating some kind of truth about the war, by giving the reader access to what Susan Sontag, writing about photography, calls "a window on the war" (Sontag 2003, 31). About the War Boom Books of the end of the 1920s, Benjamin writes: "what poured out from the flood of war books ten years later was anything but the experience that passes from mouth to ear" (Benjamin 731-2). In *Non-Combatants*, the impossibility of the "mouth to ear" process is epitomized by Alix being "most suddenly and violently sick" (*NC* 18, see also 101) as a literal obstruction of her ability to speak or make sense of experience.

Non-Combatants and Others makes clear to what extent the experience of the war cannot be understood through any form of theorizing discourse, but only, paradoxically, through affect. In that respect, the final part of the novel appears as a strange anti-climax, almost as though it had been added *a posteriori*. There, neither images of the war nor strong bodily reactions to them are to be found. The only war images appear when Daphne, Alix's pacifist mother who characteristically labels her daughter's strong affective reactions as pathological under the general and stable category "hyperaesthesia" (*NC* 153), organizes "lantern slides" in villages of Cambridgeshire "to show the photographs she had taken on her travels of men, women, and children in the other villages of other countries, thinking, so she said, the same thoughts […]. (This, of course, was by way of Promoting International Sympathy)" (*NC* 176). The irony of the parenthetical comment puts Daphne's dedication at a distance, while making her enterprise appear as a weak anticipated version of Virginia Woolf's later display of shock photographs of victims of the Spanish Civil War in *Three Guineas* (Woolf 1966, 10-12). Rather than prompting the expected redeeming affect in the audience, Daphne's slides provoke only commonplace sentimentality. The fact that her loud voice takes over at the end of the novel contrasts with the powerful impression made on Alix, and indeed on the reader, by the hypotyposis and ekphrasis of the war visions. This certainly calls for a qualification of the reading made by several critics of the end of the novel as an argument in favour of pacifism.

Conclusion: Words and war don't go together or Rose Macaulay's experimental language as testimony

Affect seems in fact banished from the last part of *Non-Combatants and Others*. "[W]e've got to think" (*NC* 163), Daphne urges instead, passing on to her daughter the idea that "lack of clear thinking […] makes people talk sentimental rubbish" (*NC* 164). Yet what is deliberately denied and put aside in the return of a traditional opposition between thinking and feeling is the idea theorized by Simone Weil in 1940 that in wartime "the possibility of death contained in every moment" makes "thought […] incapable of passing from one day to the next without encountering

continuity, the irruption of images and subsequent expressions of affect certainly stand in favour of the Benjaminian theory of radical rupture.

the image of death" (Weil 58). The "image of death" is rather to be read in Rose Macaulay's figurative language that pays tribute to her engagement with early modernism: her poetic images about the war do not contribute to an aestheticized version of the war, as the futurists claimed to produce, but craft a language more akin to what Ernst Bloch, in 1938, defined as an expressionistic "'barbaric art'", whose "ultimate goal was humane" (Bloch 24). Indeed, the difficulty to achieve any clear vision, or any stable images in the novel is emblematized by "[t]he streets" becoming "barbarically dark" (*NC* 78) while "[t]he city" gets "as black as wood at night" (*NC* 143) – a place where the characters are turned into "travellers who have lost their way in a strange country and are groping after paths in the dark" (*NC* 143) or can get "swallowed up in black fog" (*NC* 144). Rose Macaulay's own images take over the inefficient and stereotypical comparisons she inherited from others, for instance when the war is compared to a "monster" strangling its victims "like that beastly Laocoon" (*NC* 17) or a primitive beast whose "hoofs go stamping over the world" (*NC* 139).[40] Just as the soldier-artists trained at the Slade were not given the artistic vocabulary to encompass their unprecedented experience and had to create a visual language for the task, Rose Macaulay had to create a modernist aesthetic of her own to get closer to accounting for the temporal crisis.

Rather than the triumph of pacifist activism, Rose Macaulay's ending stages the failure of discourses about the war, and constitutes a deliberately failed attempt to articulate any clear answer through *logos*. What remains are only doubts metaphorized by suspension marks and a minor tonality which subsists until the final lines, in keeping with Simone Weil's idea that "[t]he possibility of a situation so violent is unthinkable outside that situation; an end to it unthinkable within it" (Weil 59). In 1915, only the power of images affords the immediate, perplexing affect that is the one possible response in the context of a historical crisis, when immediacy, unpredictability, and impossible distance prevent the elaboration of discourse.[41] In *Non-Combatants and Others*, the reader is made to experience an intense feeling of powerlessness in front of the blunt images that do not seek to water down a level of violence that, in 1916, was only just starting, and which only French writer Henri Barbusse, perhaps, accounted for with a comparably blunt realism in his novel *Under Fire* (*Le Feu*) published the same year.[42] However, affect is also extremely powerful: the bodily reactions it involves become an unarticulated language about the war, asking again and again the implicit question of how to make sense of and deal with the extreme tension of a war whose end nobody can predict. Rather than the normative vision of Alix's mother, Rose Macaulay's staging of "hyperaesthesia"

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[40] These images bear strong echoes of Walter de la Mare's and Reginald Bloom's lines that Rose Macaulay quotes as epigraphs to the novel. However, I argue, her own imagery about the war is far more powerful.

[41] This, together with Alix's general lack of enthusiasm maintained throughout the narrative, certainly supports recent reassessments of the ending as that of an "unresolved novel" (Hynes 129). Alix's final conscription in her mother's pacifist activism appears as an act of despair and an artificial shield against the gripping power of affect after her brother's untimely death, rather than a genuine embrace of hope and "a solution to war" (Boxwell 90).

[42] In 1942, Ernest Hemingway indeed calls it "the only good war book to come out during the last war", although he claims that better books appeared after the war (Hemingway xvi).

is to be defined in terms of agency and protest (Gildersleeve 2020, 27) especially as it allows for the generation of new idioms and new literary images. These in turn endeavour to bear witness to the unprecedented violence of history in the making.

Beyond offering an original vision of how women could be affected by the war through identification with their male counterparts, writing a novel in 1916 makes Rose Macaulay a forerunner of the famous dissenting voices of Paul Nash, Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon. Like them, and before them, she was, and still is, a witness who presents a "bitter truth" to the world (Nash 211), who seeks to "help to destroy the callous complacence" of "those at home" towards the "agonies […] which they have not sufficient imagination to realise" (Sassoon 1917). Her "[f]eeble, inarticulate" warning (Owen 31) addresses its very inarticulation to us from the very heart of the war. In that respect, she deserves to be considered as emblematic a "messenger" (Nash 211) of "the pity of War" (Owen 31) as her famous counterparts. No doubt Owen would have agreed to call Rose Macaulay a "true Poet" (Owen 31), or at least a "true writ[er]", in the words of Hemingway (Hemingway xiv), for affect in her novel can never be translated into words or images, but only transcribed into an experimental language at times more akin to poetry than prose or story-telling. To take our final stance from Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, who wrote about poetry after the Holocaust, "poetry happens when language unexpectedly gives way."[43] (Lacoue-Labarthe 74, translation mine)

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[43] « La poésie advient là où cède, contre toute attente, le langage. »

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