

*Sara Martin*

## **The Spirit of World War I: Patricia Anthony's *Flanders***

Patricia Anthony's remarkable novel *Flanders* (1998) returns to World War I to prove that war fiction needn't be a male-dominated genre. Close to the pacifist spirit of Eric Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), *Flanders* narrates a story that combines the horrors of combat with the search for spiritual enlightenment. Most women writers working during World War I and in its aftermath preferred dealing with the healing of the traumas caused by war rather than with the experience of combat, which they lacked (Goldman 1995: 30). Anthony offers both a portrait of the front and a reflection on where the combatants could find the mental strength necessary to endure the war. Her main character and first-person narrator, Texan private Travis Lee Stanhope, finds this strength in the recurrent presence of a feminine figure in his dreams. The 'calico girl,' as he calls her, is a representation of the feminine principle of life and death. She soothes his fears and solves the anxieties that the nightmarish trenches impose on him and his comrades, allowing him to process his own sense of guilt for his participation in the war.

Even though the 'calico girl' is a figure emerging straight from Travis Lee's subconscious, Anthony simply disregards Freudian psychoanalysis. She grounds her novel, instead, on the philosophy of Zen Buddhism, which supposes that the world is moved by the twin principles of yin and yang. "I would say," Patricia Anthony explains,

that the calico girl is the ultimate strength of the yin, which is the 'root,' if you will, of energy. If one looks at the notion of yin/yang, one sees that the yang energy is that of the child—a raucous, male, loud, active energy. But the yin is that of the calico girl—receptive, open, powerful, the 'core of goodness,' the ultimate in passive strength. . . . the calico girl was the Guardian; Travis' spirit guide or guardian angel [. . .] She is everything: the loving mother, the supernatural

guardian, the font of spiritual wisdom, the gentle protector.  
An awesome presence, like the old Earth goddess.<sup>1</sup>

The main issue I want to explore here is Anthony's unembarrassed use of this philosophy and this figure within the context of war fiction. *Flanders* is not at the same level of major work on World War I such as Pat Barker's outstanding trilogy *Regeneration* (1991-1995), but it is not a failure, either. Anthony dares carry out her own version of World War I against all literary and critical odds: she impersonates the voice of a male soldier, she produces an impossible fantasy in the relationship between this man and his British officer, she mixes the misery of trench life with the flights of fantasy of Travis' dreams and she grounds it all on a philosophy which is not exactly mainstream in the Western world. She never hesitates in the execution of her novel, though, which makes it the remarkable work it is. Whether the reader agrees or not with her vision of World War I, this is consistent. What I analyse here is not, therefore, the literary value of the final result but the tools she uses to prop her peculiar portrait of World War I and her relationship as a woman writer with the male characters in *Flanders*.

Patricia Anthony (1947, Texas) is known, above all, by her science fiction. Her novels *Brother Termite*, *Cold Allies*, *Conscience of the Beagle*, *Happy Policeman*, *Cradle of Splendor*, *God's Fires* and the short story collection *Eating Memories* have earned her a sound reputation among the readership for science fiction (or, as she prefers, speculative fiction). This is certified by the Locus Award to the best first novel that she obtained in 1994 for *Cold Allies*. The publication of *Flanders*, a novel best defined as mainstream, has thus marked a turning point in her career. It is still early to say whether her future career will combine speculative fiction and the mainstream but, given Anthony's comprehensive view of fiction and the critical success of her risky use of fantasy in *Flanders*, this seems likely.

Anthony's case shows how restrictive labelling can be for a writer. The marketing of her first six novels as science fiction has badly affected a literary career she did not see initially confined to a particular genre. She saw herself rather "as something of a thriller writer whose books just happened to include aliens." In her own view, and despite the generally good reviews, the content of her s.f. books is bound to disappoint s.f. readers searching for "'worlds of wonder' adventure, a high concept cerebral story, an escape from the day to day troubles in their lives." Far from being genre-driven, Anthony's work is character-driven in which she is quite close to mainstream novelists.

This may have enabled her to make a successful transition to the domain of the mainstream novel, though it has certainly affected her sales. Mystified by the content of *Flanders*, her hardback publishing house failed to find a suitable shelf for it in bookstores, which resulted according to Anthony in “dismal sales.”

*Flanders* received good reviews in the US but could have sunk complete out of view leaving hardly a trace if it had not been for two factors. First, the personal interest of Penguin Putnam’s president in the book, which made her insist on a second round of visits to the bookstores by her sales team. Second, the nomination by the American Library Association of *Flanders* as one of the ‘Notable Books of 1999’ in the illustrious company of writers such as Scott Anderson, Andrea Barrett, Jorge Luis Borges, Edwige Danticat, Nick Hornby, Alice McDermott, Lorrie Moore, Philip Roth and Ardashir Vakil. Anthony is specially grateful for this honour, as *Flanders* was “the only book listed which was published by a commercial genre house. It was the only one of those books which had been reviewed in *Publisher’s Weekly* as a genre book. All the rest had ‘general fiction’ on the spine and were published to fanfare by houses such as Knopf or Scribners or Vintage.” The list, publicised by *The New York Times*, brought *Flanders* to the attention of many mainstream prospective readers for whom a new trade paperback edition was published in April 2000.

This is, however, only one side of the genre question affecting the labelling of *Flanders*. Anthony’s novel is actually at a complex cross-roads as regards its genre, for it is also a historical novel and a war novel. Gender is the other main factor to take into account. The domain of the historical novel has been open to women practically from its very beginning, and specially so if we regard the Anglo-Irish Maria Edgeworth as the main predecessor of the genre’s ‘father’, Walter Scott, which he did. Quite another matter is the war novel, viewed still today by most readers and literary critics as a male-dominated genre. Anthony’s authority is complicated by her position as a woman novelist practising the genre of the war novel, yet it is even more complicated by her impressionistic use of history.

Anthony decided on World War I “because it was useful to me in history, not because of the novels written about it.” Unlike her British counterpart, Pat Barker, Anthony is not haunted by any particular literary ghost. The impressive legacy of Sigfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, transformed into fictional characters by Barker for her trilogy, is a mere shadow in Anthony’s novel. This is so despite the evident affinities between Sassoon and her

Captain Miller—both are homosexual, Jewish, poetry lovers committed out of a strong sense of duty to the welfare of their men rather than to war. Shelley's poetry, especially "Adonais" is used instead to articulate the relationship between Miller and Travis Lee—another poetry lover—because of Shelley's and Travis' shared need for spirituality. Anthony actually bore in mind the poems by Sassoon and Owen, but found a "clear distinction between the outer world (the gore and injustice and anger of Owen) and the inner world (the beauty and peace and spirituality of Shelley)." She mentions Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as the "war novels that have been most important to me," though the latter seems an unlikely choice in an imaginary list of top war novels.

Anthony set her main character, a "man who faces the worst that life and death has to offer, yet still has inner peace" and her main theme—"death in all its aspects"—in this particular war because "for the soldier . . . there has not been worse than WWI." The specific date and setting, Flanders 1916, were dictated by her realisation that it was then and there that "hope was lost and all that was left was the daily grind of battle. War had become commonplace. War had become a way of life, no longer a goal to be won. War had become the terrible, mindless machine that rolls over everything in its path—morality and courage and even outrage become moot in its shadow." Unlike Barker, who documented herself extensively to the point of including a list of secondary sources at the end of her novels, Anthony never allowed research to interfere with the telling of her story: "I didn't choose to include anything. I just did my research—some of which I did while I was writing the novel—and just let the story tell itself."<sup>2</sup> The historical inaccuracies pointed out by readers and critics worry her only moderately: "I feel badly when I get something wrong . . . ; but I'm just a storyteller, after all. I try to tell an emotional truth, even though I may get some facts wrong. And as for bad reviews—as I said, everyone comes to a work of fiction with the right to create their own interior world. Some will enjoy a work; some won't."

Gender is not a priority, either, for Anthony. "I think not in terms of gender," she declares "but of character itself." Anthony's well-received return to combat as the most relevant experience in war—a view typical of traditional, masculine views of war—suggests that there is little connection, if any, between the scholarly debates around the literary work of women on World War I and the women writing fiction today about the war, not to mention the general reading public. The intense scholarly activity of the last twenty years aimed at publicising the achievements of women writing about World War I

has left no visible trace in Anthony's own writing. She has simply ignored both the female legacy of war writing and her own position as an allegedly gendered writer, preferring instead to place empathy with her male characters at the top of her priority list. In this she has evident affinities with Pat Barker.

This doesn't mean scholarship does not help illuminate *Flanders*. Scandalised by the neglect of women's accounts of war in Bernard Bergonzi's *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of War* (1965) and Paul Fusell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), Claire Tylee claimed in 1990 a special status for women's war writing, based on the idea that "women's literary responses to war ... tend to be much wider and more subtle in scope than battle-tales, since they are interested in the social context of belligerence and its connection with personal relations and the quality of ordinary life" (13). Anthony's novel, which clearly lays the stress on combat as a most significant war, if not life, experience, seemingly rejects this 'feminine' model. In fact, personal relationships play a key role in the novel, which hinges on the strange platonic homoerotic affair between Travis Lee and Miller and the diverse forms of love and hate men come across in the trenches and over the top. These relationships are not isolated from the social reality in the home front: the men in the trenches form a microcosm representing the society back home. Indeed, the denouement of the plot is tightly linked to Miller's difficulties to adjust to the military establishment that has unleashed the moral chaos of war.

Writing from the position of the commercial writer with little literary aspirations Anthony follows contemporary fiction models rather than the Modernist legacy of war writing by women. The latter simply seems irrelevant to her case. Dorothy Goldman wondered whether the neglect of women's war writing until today should be attributed just to men's predilections—as Tylee suggested—or to other factors, such as the preference by both male and female critics and scholars for Modernist unsentimental texts in detriment of other texts by women, specifically popular sentimental fiction or other genres unafraid of the sentimental, such as biographies and autobiographies (1995: 95). Tylee disapproves, above all, of the glamorisation of the dead in texts such as Vera Brittain's autobiographical *Testament of Youth* (1933), devoted to a great extent to Brittain's grief for her dead fiancée and her dead brother. "The glamorisation is, I think," Tylee writes, "precisely what prevents a proper political consciousness of war... In the case of the so-called 'Great War' it set up a powerful barrier to understanding why the men who had fought felt so bitter, and so misunderstood" (1990: 223).

Anthony actually questions both the notions of glamorisation and sentimentalism first, by managing to create a highly emotional narrative through apparently unsentimental prose and, second, by claiming the sympathies of her readers for doomed characters absolutely devoid of any glamorisation in the sense meant by Tylee. American private Travis Lee Stanhope—in many senses an anti-hero—is no doubt glamorised if we take into account that readers are asked to regard him as a hero to identify with. But Anthony constructs this empathy between reader and character paradoxically by emphasising rather than concealing Travis' own moral failings. In this she also coincides with Pat Barker, who gives her own anti-hero Billy Prior a similar treatment. Both women writers break away from any specific model and choose to reinvent World War I fiction in the light of the 1990s generalised favouring of the anti-hero over the hero.

Beyond genre the main query regarding war writing is, nonetheless, whether women's discourse on war is truly their own or an androgynous (or masculinised) travesty shaped by men. The passivity forced onto the male combatant in the trenches and the active role of women writers working at the front as nurses or observers created a peculiar gender reversal during World War I. Male writers produced a new type of masculine sentimental fiction while female writers produced a new type of unsentimental woman's fiction. Jane Marcus calls Remarque's *All Quiet in the Western Front* (1929) a woman's novel and labels Helen Zenna Smith's response *Not so Quiet* (1930) a man's novel. "The *subject positions* of the experience of the writers, not their *gender*," Marcus writes, "produces different forms of *écriture féminine* and *écriture masculine*" (Marcus 1989: 149, emphasis original). In fact, the experience of war enabled men to take the first steps in their own particular, still ongoing, struggle to get in touch with their own feelings, a process essential in the regeneration of masculinity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the conjunction of the war and Modernism—both articulated by men's experiences—denied the validity of women's war writing, either literary or popular.

"During the Great War," Carol J. Adams observes, "the chasm between the soldier at war and the woman spectator was intentionally widened by soldier-writers who condescendingly dismissed—for lack of experience at the front—any writings by non-combatants" (1989: 250). Owen and Sassoon were among these patronising writers. Women with more or less serious artistic intentions as regards war literature were cornered thus in a difficult position. Their work, which understood war as a global experience not bounded by combat, clashed with their male peers' narrow-minded definition of war as

combat and their rejection of *écriture féminine* either literary or popular as a suitable vehicle for the description of the experience of war.

The separation of the male and female legacies of World War I writing has been quite radical until recently when Susanne Raitt and Trudi Tate have questioned the use of gender as “a critical orthodoxy” (1997: 3) at the expense of political and social aspects in dire need of analysis. Among other points they have noted, for instance, that most women writers working during and immediately after WWI were middle-class women trying to become professional writers. This made the presence of working-class men and women practically invisible in their war writing. In a later book, Tate has completely reversed Tylee’s position by claiming that “it does not seem helpful to treat gender as the final point of inquiry, as if it provided the answers to questions about the war” (1998: 5). She has therefore contrasted and compared the work of *both* male and female authors in her book *Modernism, History and the First World War*. Still, she avoids the issue of how and why Modernism defines the canon of war literature and discriminates against less literary war writing.

Anthony seems to have come to similar conclusions on her own. Gender is for her an important point of inquiry, though not as should be expected in regard to femininity. She is actually more obviously attracted by the problematic of masculinity at war and seems to relish indeed the flexibility allowed today to women writers in their choice of topic. As regards genre, Anthony never hesitates in attributing to her war fiction the same authority any novel by a man might have. Being born in 1947, the issue of having actual combat experience does not apply to her writing. Chronologically and in terms of a more or less proficient understanding of the history of World War I, she is in the same position as any of her male peers. Her being a woman may condition her war fiction to the eyes of the literary critics in ways she herself considers irrelevant, in the same way that her being a s.f. writing has conditioned her passage to the mainstream.

Anthony’s *Flanders* is, in short, both running ahead and behind academic writing on war. Her position may be read either as a conservative allegiance to man’s writing—she wants to write like a man, for men write best about ‘universal’ subjects such as war—or as a progressive liberation from all constraints: she needn’t write like/as a woman, she needn’t be a gendered writer at all. The question that must be addressed next is the actual extent of this apparently absolute de-gendering. This refusal to write primarily as a woman—women’s most revolutionary contribution to recent writing—is

actually a most apt strategy to construct a humanist message into which a basically feminine sensitivity and sensibility is deeply ingrained. Far from opposing men's writing, the de-gendered woman writer uses it to the advantage of her own renewed pacifist message, which is the true spirit of the legacy of World War I writing.

So far I have argued that Anthony's main preoccupation as regards her authority is how the restrictive labelling of her previous work has negatively affected the sales of *Flanders*. She seems free of any anxiety regarding her use of history, her literary influences and her positioning regarding other women writers. Here I return to the issue of genre, focusing on the stylistic and narrative choices that articulate *Flanders* as a war novel. *Flanders* portrays the Great War from the point of view of sensitive men involved in the horrors of combat. This forces Anthony to de-gender her style in order to lend credibility to the soldiers' voices dominating her novel. These men, ranging from British upper-class Captain Miller to American working-class private Stanhope,<sup>3</sup> are educated, sensitive men who do not fit squarely within the unemotional, patriarchal models of masculinity that the Great War first questioned. Anthony has chosen them precisely because she can feel an emotional affinity that the soldier as militaristic, masculinist hero could not provide for her. Yet, the fact is that their unmistakably masculine voices erase all possible traces of a feminine voice in Anthony's style. Her choice of protagonist and narrative technique—*Flanders* is an epistolary novel—forces Anthony to write 'like a man,' if not 'as a man,' with all the problematic this implies in her position as a contemporary woman writer.

Although it might seem that the epistolary form was chosen for the sake of directness, Anthony actually chose it to "in order to shield the reader from the worst of the horror, to act as a 'buffer,' if you will. Had I told this first person or third person intimate, the average reader would have been overcome by the death and the gore. They would not have finished reading." As is well known, censorship made it impossible for soldiers to freely write home about what they saw at the front. Travis Lee's most literary letters correspond, precisely, to the missives he knows will take time to reach his addressee, his 14-year-old brother Bobby. Anthony claims, nonetheless, that American soldiers of Travis Lee's generation were "much more literate than the average American today," which accounts for the high literary quality of many of the actual letters written during World War I.

The choice of Travis Lee as her first person narrator and of Bobby as his addressee confines Anthony's writing in diverse directions. Bobby, imagined



by Anthony as a whining, overprotected younger brother, was meant to be a “sounding board.” Unexpectedly, Bobby apparently also fulfils for many male readers a passive role they identify with: they seemingly feel that Travis Lee’s letters are addressed straight to them, which increases their empathy with him. As I have noticed, Anthony is completely untroubled by gender issues. Her relationship with Travis Lee is conditioned, rather, by the empathy that allows any author to “create from the subconscious.” Anthony sees herself indeed “as something of a Travis Lee—particularly in my Texanisms,” for regional identity seems to be the main feature shared by author and character. These Texanisms are naturally present in the letters Travis Lee addresses Bobby, in which ‘talking Southern’ is used as a sign of brotherly affection. At the front, Travis Lee notes, “I speak fluent Texan around the limeys as they enjoy it so, and are not hurtful with their joshing like the Yankee boys” (13).<sup>4</sup>

Anthony faced an important problem as regards Travis Lee’s skills as a writer. She had to combine in the letters the brothers’ particular idiolect and a literary sensibility solid enough to impress the reader with the enormity of the emotional upheaval the war means for Travis Lee. Anthony observes she made Travis Lee “be a fan of the English Romantic poets at the same time I could have him banter in Texan;” in fact, she needed him to be Shellyan poet, friendly brother and bantering Texan. Travis Lee’s personality was thus constructed out of a mixture of the traces of his rural, impoverished Texan childhood and his Harvard years as an undergraduate medical student, years in which he learnt to love poetry, especially the Romantics. Enrolled in the British army before the US enter the war for the sake of getting “a couple of spoonfuls of adventure” (20), Travis Lee finds in the trenches confirmation to his initial impression at Harvard that he can’t fit anywhere. Travis Lee’s partly failed de-classing through education, his youth and his position as an isolated American outsider gives his character a versatility that was wholly necessary for Anthony’s purposes.

Bobby’s presence also conditions the language Anthony/Travis Lee use in the letters in the sense that, clearly, the register a young man would use when addressing his younger brother is very different from the one he would use if he addressed an older man—his father or another male relative—or a woman, either mother or sweetheart. The letters that David Barton, one of the main characters in Susan Hill’s World War I novel *Strange Meeting* (1971), writes are addressed to his middle-class family; they are affectionate and realistic enough when it comes to the depiction of horror, but they are clearly bounded by notions of decorum, for his mother and sisters will read them. In a certain

sense, Travis Lee is as free as he can possibly be in his writing, discounting the interference of the officers as censors in the letters he does send home. This also means that Anthony has granted herself absolute freedom in her impersonation of the soldier's male voice. It does not mean, though, she has merely copied the already available male voices of war fiction, or specifically of World War I fiction.

For Paul Fussell, the ironic view of the world originating in World War I has become the "dominating form of modern understanding" (1975: 35). It also became the dominant stylistic resource to control the emotional overreaction that could have prevented writers from articulating their views of the war. The irony arising from the gap between the expectations and reality became a basic ingredient of the emotional detachment combatants required to endure horror on a daily basis. Irony survived the war to shape its aftermath and the poetry, fiction and autobiographies of the 1920s and 1930s, the years of the rise and fall of Modernism. Women may not have been familiar with combat, but their work as amateur nurses at the front certainly required similar strategies. Some used irony indeed to mock the absurdities of the war, mostly the Modernists. The dominant feminine mode in war writing was an 'unfeminine' emotional detachment before the broken bodies of men. Women used, Tylee writes, "a repetitive style that displayed soldiers as passive victims of an uncontrollable, inhuman, mechanical social system" (1990: 102). They overcame thus the old-fashioned sentimental, masculinist lies about the glory of war and the worst excesses of feminine sentimentalism inspired by these lies, together with restrictive notions of ladylike decorum.

The Great War, however, allowed men to discover not only irony but also high emotion in the middle of carnage. The literature by the combatants abounds in mood swings between irony and high emotion, which seems to attract contemporary women writers better than the detached texts of the female Modernists. This may be at the root of the de-gendering of women writers like Patricia Anthony and Pat Barker. Despite the vindication of an autonomous feminine voice to narrate the war, Anthony seems to round off a process of approximation between women writers and male soldiers possibly beginning in the 1970s with Susan Hill's own *Strange Meeting*. This process subordinates the female writer's authority to the male characters', often to the point of allowing the characters' writing to replace the author's. Susan Hill simply erases any trace of an authorial female voice by choosing officer John Hilliard as her main character and displacing heterosexual romance towards homosocial bonding. Hilliard, a shy, dissatisfied man finds a new meaning for

life in devoting all his energies to trying to protect his beloved David Barton, a fellow officer, from harm. Hill follows her likeable young men to the trenches, carrying her impersonation of her male characters as far as to describe the ravages of war mainly through the letters David writes to his loving family. Pat Barker similarly uses the diary of one of her main characters, Billy Prior, to describe the front in the last stages of the war and of her trilogy. *Flanders* completes this cycle through the letters co-authored by Travis Lee and Patricia Anthony.

Travis—and Anthony through him—seems specially interested in mingling high feeling with the materiality of the dirt in the trenches. Passages like this one are characteristic of the ironic clash between emotion and reality and also a sample of how the impersonation of a male voice can free women writers today from any restraint based on the enforcement of decorum:

Hope you had a happy 4<sup>th</sup>, little brother! No hot dogs, nor red, white and blue here, but I had me a celebration anyways. Yesterday morning we were all sitting at the back latrine: me and Marrs and Pickering. I was having a good sit-down myself, not the yellow squirt I get when the water's bad, nor the dark goat-turd pebbles I get when the food's not plentiful enough. No, this was a great, glorious golden cigar of a turd that felt fine and upstanding coming out, a British sort of turd. Major Dunn could have pinned a medal on it. (*Flanders*: 96)

This is carnivalesque prose, intimately tied to the choice of a working-class, educated man as narrator and to the de-gendered position of the woman writer: all traces of the 'feminine' and the 'literary' voice have been erased here. The passage spells out a clear anti-war message: for Travis, and for Patricia Anthony, war is literally shit. Men may have written similar passages before, but for women the path out of the boundaries marked by lady-like decorum has been a much longer one. Only now have women writers fully realised the promise of total freedom for their writing that was budding by the time of World War I. Whether this makes them write as honorary men rather than as women is still far from clear, though.

What the 1990s no doubt contribute to Travis Lee/Anthony's perspective is a specific liberation in the description of sex and violence. There is no room here to address the complex issue of how war media coverage—jour-

nalistic photography, TV—and horror films interact with written fiction to enhance the limits of the realistic representation of bodily destruction and sexuality. Gory scenes of carnage are used today as effectively by Stephen King in his horror novels as by Steven Spielberg in his war films. Sex verging on the pornographic is habitual in mainstream literary fiction. Anthony, a King fan, is not particularly affected by the violent passages she wrote. “As I’m writing,” she explains “I distance myself from the work. I must, in order to use all my skills properly. I must be distanced in order to manipulate the reader’s emotions. So it was the research, particularly the photos, that got to me sometimes; not the writing.”

Her manipulation of the readers’ emotions is most effective, precisely, when the writing is most subdued. The visualisation of certain key scenes—especially the dream in which Miller invites Travis Lee to seek reconciliation with his dead father—produces an emotion that is born out of the empathy with the characters rather than from the aesthetic quality of the prose. This works both for the crude scenes of carnage and the more delicate passages of spiritual enlightenment. The empathy between character and reader, Anthony points out, must not be hindered by the writer’s ego, that is to say, by the potential overwriting of key scenes. Her own writer’s ego seems better expressed through the spiritual feminine presence that drives Travis Lee forward in his search for justice and peaceful death. The apparently thoroughly masculinised writing is shaped at heart by an androgynous, rather than de-gendered, sensibility that seeks the balance between male and female sensibilities. The brutality of the events, which conditions the brutality of the prose, is nothing but a most convenient vehicle to reach the real core of the novel: the celebration of the hope of spiritual survival signified by the calico girl, that is to say, by femininity.

The fact that Anthony’s anti-war message is couched in quite violent, ‘masculine’ prose might seem a contradiction, but it actually works on the premise that showing rather than telling is more effective to drive the message home to the reader. And this reader is, essentially, a man used to the codes of fictional violence in war films and novels. Women may discover a whole new experience of war through reading *Flanders*, but they are not Anthony’s main addressees; these are men, if only because the responsibility for war still falls in men’s hands. This explains both the de-gendering of the woman writer, which helps her freely explore the sensitive masculinity she wants to endorse and reach the target readership for her message, and the relevance of the male narrator. Anthony convinces her readers that men and women may well share

a similar humanist sensitivity and sensibility towards the issue of war. By writing with pathos and intelligence through and about sensitive men, and Travis is clearly one of them, the masculinist, warring man is literally condemned to death in the name of a new humanist discourse based on justice and equality for all.

Anthony's view of masculinity is defined by the consideration of the meaning of justice in the midst of war. *Flanders* reflects the contradictions between empathy and duty in the relationships between soldiers and officers at the front partly in relation to combat and partly in relation to the violent crimes against women committed by a Canadian soldier, LeBlanc. The paradox *Flanders* sets up rests on four cornerstones. First, Travis Lee's demand of justice for LeBlanc's victims forces him to question his task in the army, for he is employed as a most effective sharpshooter. Second, part of his sense of justice derives from his estrangement from his abusive, alcoholic father. His shadow is ever present in Travis Lee's thoughts as a permanent threat that he will eventually become another monster like him. Third, equally monstrous is the behaviour of the British army, which does not hesitate to send Miller's company to die—only 20 of 240 men survive the final botched attack—only because they despise him for being a Jew. Finally, Miller surrenders to the impossibility of striking a balance between the army's order that LeBlanc be protected at all costs, and Travis Lee's appeal to Miller's sense of justice for LeBlanc's victims. Miller's taking justice in his hands leads to a most poignant sacrifice that restores a certain sense of balance.

Essentially, the lesson Miller teaches Travis Lee—the lesson the reader receives through Travis Lee's letters—is that justice can only be found in pity and forgiveness. The voice of LeBlanc's female victims is silenced or, rather, collectively represented by the calico girl's constant offer of love and peace beyond death. She is in charge of forgiving Travis Lee for the sins he has committed: his killing of enemy soldiers, his hatred of his father, his failure to protect the last of LeBlanc's victims. His enlightenment is actually the process by which he learns to discover justice in pity. The process is given momentum by the sight of the horribly disfigured face of LeBlanc's victim as much as by the ghost of the last German soldier Travis Lee kills before he gives up sharpshooting. From that moment onwards, he finds the courage to start forgiving. He passes from writing that “the English may have seen the war, but I have lived with Pa, so I have seen hell” (13) to feeling that although not quite ready to forgive him yet, he's sorry indeed that his father “couldn't enjoy what life gave him” (225). True forgiveness for the father's drunken vio-

lence against the mother finally comes after the old man's death thanks to Miller's intercession in a moving dream that gathers together the two men closest to Travis's feelings. Anthony's merit is that this sentimental solution which risks being a simple cliché works well in the context of a novel marked by the realistic horrors of combat.

Serial killer LeBlanc is also forgiven because his faulty upbringing at an orphanage has made him the monster he is. What fails in his case is institutional military justice, which will not regard his crimes as a serious breach of order simply because he is his battalion's most decorated soldier. Miller is trapped by diverse factors: his sense of duty as a British officer, his platonic homosexual inclination for Travis Lee, the discrimination he suffers from for being a Jew and his own personal sense of justice. In the end, he decides to force military justice to act by killing LeBlanc in cold blood, which results in Miller's immediate court martial and execution. Miller's action is foolish enough, for there were other ways of disposing of LeBlanc without endangering his own life. Sergeant Blackhall—a cop in civilian life with his own code of justice—cannot understand why Miller has not asked any of his men to help him get rid of LeBlanc simulating his death in combat. Miller's apparent foolishness, however, is actually an act of public defiance of the military establishment. By allowing himself to be unfairly executed, he has his men realise there is no real justice within the army. They understand that neither LeBlanc's victims nor the massive deaths in the company are an issue for the callous establishment, as Blackhall is told when he testifies in Miller's favour. They also see that Miller's rash act springs from his dejection when he realises that most of his company has been sacrificed to the capricious orders of his superiors, who simply refuse to accept a Jew can be a good officer. As Anthony explains, Miller is not "part of the Old Boy network . . . One had the idea that, after the war, these same officers would never invite him to a party."

Miller finally chooses imparting his own kind of justice as a way to denounce social prejudice. In the last conversation between Miller and his beloved Travis Lee, Miller explains that there is justice indeed in his killing LeBlanc:

"Ain't no justice, sir. That's the goddamned bullshit. Wasn't no justice when my pa came looking for me with the belt. Never saw a lick of justice, 'cept for what came from you."

He sighed. "Well. There is justice. I wish you'd believe that."

Wish you'd try to bring it about. Otherwise what I've done has no meaning, you see." (388)

Anthony, of course, agrees with Miller, noting that "Miller's execution of LeBlanc was the ultimate in justice. He could not have allowed LeBlanc to go home to murder more women. No, LeBlanc's true home was in war. ... A very wise and moral man, Miller."

The relationship between Travis Lee and the calico girl is, precisely, conditioned by his slowly gaining a sound moral positioning, perhaps wisdom. He is no doubt a moral man from the very beginning, which is what makes him a suitable narrator of moral atrocity. It would not do to narrate the war from LeBlanc's amoral position. "For me," Anthony explains "I must have a protagonist who has a saving grace in him. I felt sorry for LeBlanc, but I wouldn't want to spend a war with him—nor the entire course of a novel. I would not want to see life through his eyes. Now *that* would disturb me." Travis Lee, however, commits a terrible moral fault which is not, however, a sin since he's not religious. When he witnesses the gruesome rape of the French girl by LeBlanc he misreads the sexual violence for consented intercourse and masturbates; not even the sight of the wounded girl's blood and the realisation that she's badly beaten stops him. The shame at his behaviour is what ultimately conditions his moral evolution, which is sealed, as has been noted, when he stops killing.

Initially, Travis Lee sees killing as morally the equivalent of hunting: "I shall soon overcome my squeamishness, for killing is why I came. But the first deer I shot was so sloe-eyed that I sat down and cried over him, too" (17). By the middle of his personal odyssey killing has become a sign of his impending transformation into the type of man he hates. As he writes: "For all of us it's only one short step to Pa's savagery, another step to LeBlanc's" (291). Religion is not an option for Travis, since the company's Catholic priest, O'Shaugnessey, always offers pardon no matter how many of the enemy Travis Lee kills. "God had to be stuffed to the gills with the fruit of heroes," he writes (291). By the end, he's discovered his own secular, moral definition of killing: "Strange how murder wasn't a sin until I knew" (334).

Travis Lee has an early glimpse of the calico girl the first time he is wounded. She soon reappears in a dream about the dead men of his platoon: "And there she stood, a gold and blue breath of mercy" (100). She is the guardian of a graveyard where, as she tells Travis Lee in one of the very few occasions when she speaks, the men rest. "I started to tell her," Travis Lee writes "that

I wanted to rest, too, maybe just put my head down for a while. But she knew; and she held me, not the way a pretty girl would, but the way Ma always used to do—me small in the fortress of her arms” (101). If Travis Lee does not surrender to the girl’s charms, this is because he is troubled by the dark area at the back of the dream cemetery, where some form of evil seems to lurk. In the end, he discovers the darkness in the graveyard is nothing but the ground in no man’s land. The ghost of Father O’Shaughnessey, killed in combat, sends Travis Lee the message that there is no evil, only love. So does the girl in a premonitory dream Travis Lee has shortly before he joins his comrades in the graveyard. In his final letter to Bobby, he writes:

You listen careful now, Bobby, for I must tell you the most important secret: The black by the cypress looks threatening, but beyond waits a calm and sparkling place. And if I never bequeath you anything else, I give you this certainty: That shimmer I’ve seen is the power of the universe. It runs through me and you, through the dead men in the field and through the rats that eat them. It’s love. Funny how simple.  
(412)

In this story of love among men, the calico girl is all the women. Travis Lee has no sweetheart at home for, Anthony clarifies, “he always tended to run away from his responsibilities.” A lover of many women, he loves none in particular, although he clearly “loved them most as the ideal, the fictional,” Anthony notes. The calico girl is, literally, his dream girl. Whether the reader follows or not Anthony’s Zen Buddhism, her description of this girl as “the ultimate in passive strength” makes this character an apt metaphor to express the feminisation of the men in WWI. The men trapped in the trenches learnt that their true strength could not derive from masculine action, which was not possible under the confining circumstances and only resulted in massive death when they went over the top. Their endurance had to rely on this oxymoronic ‘passive strength’. Many soldiers, as is well know, broke down in what was then known as shell-shock and now as post-stress traumatic syndrome because they could not cope with the nervous state induced by the immobility and the passivity the trenches forced on them. Anthony turns Travis Lee’s own feminised passivity into a positive fantasy in which femininity represents hope and love rather than defeat.

In a sense, both Patricia Anthony and Pat Barker address a similar issue:



what could give a spiritual dimension to the terrible material conditions of WWI? Barker describes Dr. William Rivers's successful use of psychoanalysis to heal the mental wounds of men, but in her third volume, *The Ghost Road*, Rivers himself seeks relief for his own war-related stress in his memories of his days as an anthropologist researching the death cult of a tribe of Melanesian 'barbarians.' The primitive beliefs of those 'barbarians' help him process the horrors caused by the so-called European 'civilization.' Anthony opts for a similar 'pagan' New Age solution to the dilemma, in an attempt to convince her male readers to seek love, understood as universal agape, and renounce war. Travis Lee, training to be doctor to ensure the social advancement of his white-trash family, soon realises that healing has limitations: "I don't want to spend my life doctoring, for there's some wounds you just can't heal" (117). Whereas Rivers's patients manifest their mental distress through the psychosomatic symptoms he cures—mutism, hysterical paralysis, selective amnesia—the symptoms of Travis Lee's shell-shock are the ghosts he sees, the graveyard hallucinations, the calico girl dreams. Since no Dr. Rivers is available for him, he cures himself by getting in touch with his deepest fears and letting his subconscious process them. The girl can be thus read as a supernatural, spiritual presence (the yin) or as a manifestation of Travis Lee's own psyche.

The presence of the feminine—or the yin, if you will—in *Flanders* is finally more powerful than the presence of the masculine, either as destroyer or as defender of justice. Masculinity is regenerated by the pity, forgiveness and love that the feminine principle offers. Anthony gives a mythical shape through the calico girl to a fundamental anti-war message deeply ingrained at the core of all war fiction since World War I. Being anti-war, pro-yin, this message is most attractive for women like her, who are actively renewing it today, and addressing it mainly to men. Unlike their World War I counterparts, today's women writers, all non-combatants distanced by time from the war, prefer empathy with men rather than dehumanisation as the main resource to send out their pacifist message. The fusion of the male narrator's and the female writer's voice responds to this empathy, understood as the basis for a new humanism, rather than for a feminist literary agenda. Many readers, male and female, have mostly welcomed *Flanders* without questioning Patricia Anthony's authority, message or Zen beliefs. This is the real triumph of the pacifist, humanist spirit legated by the men and women who suffered the horrors of World War I.

### Notes

1. All the quotations by Patricia Anthony come from an interview I myself carried out in April 2000. (See Works Cited).
2. The American customers who wrote reviews of *Flanders* for the Internet bookshop Amazon (<http://www.amazon.com>) were generally indifferent to questions of historical accuracy. The British readers were much more sensitive towards this issue (<http://www.amazon.co.uk>). A Scottish reader wrote (5 October 1999) that *Flanders* is “well intentioned but not one for the Historians,” and concluded it was “interesting for all the bits not about the war.” Another from the isle of Wight (6 August 1999) found an “immense numbers of errors and misunderstanding.” He recommended instead Frederick Manning’s *The Middle Parts of Fortune* because “at least he was there.” In any case, hardly any woman gave her opinion on *Flanders*.
3. I am leaving aside the problematic use of diverse dialects of English in *Flanders*. Few English readers seems to have been satisfied with the accents of the British characters.
4. I am quoting from the Black Swan edition of *Flanders* (London, 1999).

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Flanders : a novel. by. Anthony, Patricia. Publication date. 1998. Topics. World War, 1914-1918. Publisher. New York : Ace Books. Collection. inlibrary; printdisabled; internetarchivebooks; americana. Digitizing sponsor. Internet Archive. Patricia Marie Anthony (March 29, 1947 – July 2, 2013) was an American science fiction and slipstream author. Anthony published her first science fiction novel in 1992 with *Cold Allies*, about the arrival of extraterrestrials in the midst of a 21st-century Third World War. This was followed by *Brother Termite*, *Conscience of the Beagle*, *The Happy Policeman*, *Cradle of Splendor*, and *God's Fires*, each of which combined science fiction plots with other genres in unconventional ways. Several of her short