Reshmi Dutta-Flanders,
The Language of Suspense in Crime Fiction.
A Linguistic Stylistic Approach

by Esterino Adami

From booming Netflix series to popular novels, crime narrative continues to represent an attractive arena, whose boundaries are often porous and tend to mix with other genres. But when we approach a crime story, how does the text precisely manage to balance its parts so as to draw and maintain our attention until its final coup de theatre when the murderer is revealed? What are the linguistic and stylistic strategies that permit us to access the killer's mode of thought? Is it possible to delineate some specific traits of the genre and its ability to construct and develop suspense? These are some of the research questions that Reshmi Dutta-Flanders aims to address in her original, complex and informed monograph, in which she meticulously applies various tools and frameworks to a wealth of crime stories, with the purpose to illuminate the essence and structure of suspense. This may be defined as "an emotional process unlike *mystery* (the gradual revelation of criminous information), which is an intellectual process, as in a whodunit" (2, emphasis in original).

The main focus of the volume is on three literary works: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie (1926), *Cover her Face* by D. James (1962) and *The Good Soldier* by Ford Madox Ford (1915), although other materials too are subjected to analysis. The structural intricacy of these three texts is the result of different techniques and is achieved especially thanks to the presence of a "hybrid voice, which is defined by

multivoicedness of simultaneous mimetic and diegetic linguistic aspects" (27-28). What we can observe in the unfolding of such stories is that the different roles of author, narrator and character may go through processes of negotiation, overlapping and manipulation. Let us consider, for instance, the Agatha Christie novel, whose narrative architecture challenges the sense of reliability for the narrator and expresses the confessional nature of much crime fiction, as Umberto Eco pointed out in his exploration of literary worlds[1]. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* in fact is often cited in narratology as an illustration of how textual ambiguity affects the readers as nuances, and twists and turns, culminate in the final chapter of the story, suitably entitled "Apologia," and redefine the reticent role of the narrating protagonist. To unravel the textual patterns and motifs hidden in the plot of this and other novels too, Dutta-Flanders carries out a detailed examination which "is not about the 'who' committed the crime, but about 'how' criminality is presented in a criminal narrative. It analyzes the offender intention, the 'goings on' that happened prior to, during and following the act" (1). Thus she adopts a frame-based approach to narrative discourse by breaking it into a succession of episodic moments, since she believes that "in crime fiction, an event (microcontext) may stand out against the background of other thematic frames in the narrative frame (the skeleton of the story) when creating a risky point (cardinal point) in the narrative" (5). As a result, the textual material under consideration can be minutely deconstructed and investigated so as to extract its forms, values and messages.

Reshmi Dutta-Flanders' scrutiny benefits from a wide range of disciplines and methods, combining and adapting insights and concepts from critical stylistics, functional grammar, literary studies, sociology, linguistic forensics and cognitive psychology. Such an interdisciplinary and robust approach permits to decrypt various issues and layers. For instance, the recourse to the concept of "double function," "a process by which participants create vantage points for participant disposition, which is not obvious in prospective or in retrospective narration" (137), tracks the manipulation of analeptic and proleptic planes, with the creation of alternative or hypothetical scenarios or storyworlds. From a narratological angle, on the other hand, Dutta-Flanders also considers the construction and shifts of tense in the fictional text (from historical conversational present to past simple) as revelatory clues for the offender's account and ideology. Attention is also dedicated to other significant aspects like the use of modality that notably affects the way readers respond to the story since it "is concerned with the interpersonal or the attitudinal feel of an utterance in text and is relative to the point of view of the speaker" (209). Hence the key role of those modalised structures (e.g. pronouns, lexical and auxiliary verbs, evaluative terms) that function as the rhetorical backbone of the genre in shaping focalisation and perspective.

An interesting and stimulating chapter is dedicated to the notion of "orientation," which in a nutshell discloses the criminal mind and the urge to kill, hurt and transgress, and is mirrored in the stratified order of different diegetic layers. In other words, "a speaker's self is thematized, revealing its past in relation to the personal and the private

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[1] See Umberto Eco, *Sei passeggiate nei boschi letterari* (Milan, Bompiani, 1994); available in English translation: *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1994).

issues" (409). By drawing on social and behavioural sciences, and by investigating a series of materials told in first person, including the morbid and very probably fake diary of Jack the Ripper (edited by Harrison) and the disturbing interviews given by American serial killer Ted Bundy to journalists Michaud and Aynesworth, Dutta-Flanders tests a new linguistic/stylistic approach to the exploration of the offender's identity and discourse. In this kind of analysis, orientation is put forward with reference to behavioural science with labels as 'visionary' and 'hedonistic', but it is also employed via categories of modal senses, either in the case of agent-oriented modality (e.g. obligation, ability, necessity) or speaker-oriented modality (grammatically rendered by structures like imperative, admonitive or permissive forms). It is a journey within and across words, thoughts and texts, in which for example "[t]he Ripper's idea of violence for self-gratification is determined first in his imagination, and then carried out in reality" (439). Here the purpose is to unearth how a narrative is governed by a specific viewpoint regarding the narrator, or author, who operates the ideational function of the act of telling. Thus, the idea of "mind-style" (originally theorised by Roger Fowler) is introduced to look at the inner and more subtle articulations of a crime story and the way a villain conceptualises surrounding reality and innermost fantasy. This twofold dimension is the core of the self, whose definition can read as "the difference between the immediate single mental event and a state, a condition with respect to circumstance that continues over time in terms of two selves" (462), hence the conflicting spaces of changing self and permanent self.

The Language of Suspense is certainly characterised by vastness and richness in terms of analytical tools, bibliographical references and primary texts. Its argumentation starts from the fundamental contribution of scholars such as Genette, Ricoeur and Todorov, and then it draws from contemporary stylistics and cognitive methods, and it elucidates the workings of a body of literary materials, featuring authors like D. James, Patricia Highsmith and Ira Levin. The complexity of the volume should not discourage the reader: on the contrary, the theories and considerations systematically presented, employed and proposed by Dutta-Flanders constitute a valuable aid to tackle crime discourse, and gain insights into the effects generated by specific rhetorical devices and textual patterns. It is a project set to delve into "the relationship between the language and its style, and in the interconnections between the factual and its creative aspects" (478). This type of study ultimately aims to turn a critical lens on some representations of society to achieve an understanding of its dynamics, but also of its shadows and ghosts: those of criminality and evil, and their narrative rendition.

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Esterino Adami
Università degli Studi di Torino

esterino.adami@unito.it