



# *In the Year of the Rat. From infection to poisoning in David Peace's Occupied City*

by Nicoletta Vallorani

## 1. POISONING AS A METAPHOR

Susan Sontag's probably most influencing work – her reflection on the metaphoric aura enveloping certain diseases – may be of some use in introducing my approach to David Peace's narrative, with particular reference to the so called Tokyo Trilogy. As we know, Sontag – a cancer-patient herself – starts working on illnesses in 1978 (*Illness As Metaphor*), introducing the notion of infection as related, in certain cases, to a form of social shame: venereal diseases as well as TB are felt as pathologies that have to be hidden and suffered in secluded places not only because they are infectious and they result in death sentences, but mostly in that they are felt as obscene, since they "imply living processes of a particularly resonant and horrid kind" (Sontag 2001: 8-9). In these cases, the awareness of the victim's infection – normally if inexplicably – triggers social shame, that is not mitigated by the fact that infection results from a dreadful fate rather than from a "risky" behaviour. When approaching AIDS, Sontag seems to switch towards a somewhat more "political" stance, bringing together two powerful



metaphors about illness and introducing a third from scratch: the body's *invasion* from within, by a retrovirus that is to be fought as if it were a military enemy, is soon perceived as a *punishment* for a sexually "unnatural" behaviour; the victim, marginalized and unfairly excluded by the community, may seek to exploit his/her condition to gain a *retribution* against the community, spreading the virus that will poison the community (Sontag 2001: 40ff).

Invasion, punishment and retribution are my keywords in approaching the story that Peace wants to tell us in *Occupied City*. Though not directly related to the issues raised by Sontag, Peace's approach to literature has much to do with the twin notions of infection and poisoning. The former is always present in his narrative as a metaphoric process applying to the spreading of evil in society, while the latter may be conceived as the key to the story only in *Occupied City*, that is the novel we are interested in here. Published in 2009 and following the thematically related *Tokyo Year Zero*, the novel can be read without going back to the first one in the series, being totally independent in terms of characters and plot, while at the same time showing a kinship that appears mostly in some recurring themes and a shared atmosphere. Peace always works very much on personal and collective obsessions, constantly relating them to a very precise historical frame and narrating what interests him in a style unmistakably revealing his own voice. It is a fact that, in this respect, *Occupied City* reveals a number of contiguities with its predecessor, *Tokyo Year Zero* (2007). However – unlike the four parts of the *Red Riding Quartet*<sup>1</sup> – the Tokyo novels stand further apart from each other, and it could be said that *Occupied City*, though intensely marked as belonging to Peace's metaphoric universe, diverges in many ways from its predecessor in terms of how the notion of infection is inflected as poisoning. However deeply related to each other they may appear in medical theory and practice, the two notions are partially reshaped by Peace in order to suit the novelist's narrative purpose of investigating upon specific historical occurrences and/or contexts, that are respected and represented in a most documented way, but at the same time they are enveloped in a symbolic halo that is meant to provide the author's position on "the real".

In this respect, my position is that it is not by chance that the key metaphor of infection, prevailing in both the *Red Riding Quartet* and *Tokyo Year Zero*, develops here into the concept of poisoning, one that triggers the dynamics of the plot but also symbolizes Peace's interpretation of the historical frame of reference he chooses to focus on. In a more practical perspective, what I would like to show is how the notion of poisoning – evidently related to the biological warfare's plan that is at issue in the events narrated in *Occupied City*<sup>2</sup> – develops into the notion of poisoning, producing a

<sup>1</sup> This definition designates the four novels – 1974 (1999), 1977 (2000), 1980 (2001), 1983 (2002) – set in Yorkshire and developing around the true crime known as the murders of the Yorkshire Ripper.

<sup>2</sup> The very specific notion of biological warfare – an expression easily oversimplified and interestingly used with many different meanings – that Peace explicitly refers to, is explained in M. Schreiber,



development in Peace's narrative, automatically determining a revision of the reservoir of myths and metaphors that the novelist is used to exploit.

The potential strength of the metaphor of infection seems to be fully at work in Peace, for the first time, in the *Red Riding Quartet*. There this thematic reference mostly functioned at a metaphorical level in a plot where the virus of corruption was shown as propagating all through the hierarchy of police and institutions in Yorkshire.<sup>3</sup> In Peace's portrayal of the two specular environments of news rooms and police offices, the deterioration of institutional practices took the shape of an evil deliberately persisted in, travelling smoothly from one character to the other, in the manner of a parasitic disease. The medical analogy helped Peace to render the impossibility of resisting the contagion of crime that was given as the key to the development of many characters in the story – mostly policemen and journalists. What the story eventually amounted to was the rendering of a social landscape that appeared to have deteriorated fatally and become ultimately irredeemable.<sup>4</sup>

*Tokyo Year Zero*, 5 years after the last novel in the *Red Riding Quartet*, revealed Peace's intention to move to a totally different kind of context. However, it soon appeared that the first "Japanese story" had been conceived as a kin to the Yorkshire Ripper narrative. Indeed, the novel developed around the killing of prostitutes<sup>5</sup> inspired by a real crime committed in 1946 as a pretext for reconstructing the delicate moment of the Japanese surrender to the American occupying forces after Nagasaki's and Hiroshima's nuclear bombing. Set in the Year of the Dog, the novel exploited the investigation aimed at framing the Japanese Ripper in order to bring up the issue of the nation's loss of identity and give voice to a tough-minded criticism of the modes and modalities of the US occupation. However, the main focus remained – as happened in the *Red Riding Quartet* – on *petits récits*, the abysmal stories voicing the defeat of Tokyo and the end of Japanese imperial power. The late hub of the Empire of the Sun slowly faded into existence around the characters as a landscape of ruins. The city was portrayed mourning its dead and brooding on its glorious past. It appeared literally drenched in water, constantly battered by rain which, besides being a familiar feature of Peace's urban landscapes,<sup>6</sup> here also becomes the carrier of an infection that

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*Shocking Crimes in Postwar Japan* (Yenbooks, 1996) and W. Triplett, *Flowering of the Bamboo* (Woodbine House, 1985). The full bibliography the novelist exploits is provided at the end of the book (Peace 2009: 273-274).

<sup>3</sup> On this issue, see N. Vallorani, "Serializing Evil. David Peace and the Formulae of Crime Fiction" (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> This aspect appeared the most evident in 1977 in particular, that was set in a suburb – Chapeltown – deliberately built to closely resemble Jack the Ripper's Whitechapel.

<sup>5</sup> *The Red Riding Quartet* is entirely built on the unresolved murder of prostitutes that took place in Yorkshire, even though, among the four novels composing the Quartet, 1977 is the most tightly focused on this true-crime.

<sup>6</sup> Plenty of examples of this kind of landscape are to be easily found not only in the *Red Riding Quartet*, but also in the story of the Miners' Strike told in *GB84* (2005).



is both symbolic and physical. In this respect, therefore, and from the point of view of infection, *Tokyo Year Zero* replicated a pattern analogous to the one we had found in the *Red Riding Quartet*: the spreading of the virus was more "physical", grounded in the medical and practical condition of the city where the story was set. The dying city, emperor Hirohito's speech spelling out the end of the Empire of the sun, the landscape of ruins among which the city dwellers scavenged through garbage and rubbish hoping to find something to eat, all of this coalesced to portray a world defeated to the bone and infested with dishonour and lice. It is true that, as usual, what Peace described was very much the narrative version of the actual historical conditions in late-forties Japan, and fact and fiction easily overlapped. "In 1946 – explains Meek – violent killing has touched every family in Tokyo, whether through blood ties to soldiers and sailors fallen in the war, to any of the hundreds of thousands of victims of American bombing, or to the perpetrators of the atrocities in which the Japanese killed millions of civilians" (Meek 2009). The past of Japan has been swept away, leaving in its wake a confused mass of individuals, each of them in search of a new identity, both personal and collective. On this ground, Peace builds a network of symbolic meanings that not only support the tale but also offer a key to the contingencies of history, crowding the picture with a host of characters that appeared symbolically and pragmatically to be infected by the defeat of the empire, and collapsing under the weight of shared responsibilities and shame. An icon of this condition is provided precisely at the beginning of the novel. The Japanese prostitute whose body was found on military property, actually the first victim of the Japanese Ripper, works as a leading metaphor, effectively summing up the condition of Japan at the end of the war: a drowned Ophelia, marooned "not in rain or sea water" since "the shelter was flooded with sewage from broken pipes; a black sunken pool of piss and shit" (Peace 2007: 11).

When moving to the second novel in the Tokyo Trilogy, Peace sensibly revises his approach. In terms of plot, *Occupied City* switches from the crime of a number of geishas to the intricate web of spy work that had developed towards the end of the war and after. Two fictional and actual years after *Tokyo Year Zero* – *Occupied City* is set in 1948 and was published in 2009 – Peace goes back to the same setting to tell a different story. From the point of view of real history, not many things have changed a couple of years after the Japanese defeat. The slow transformation of the Empire of the Sun into the Republic of Japan is still very much ongoing and the economic and cultural crisis seems very far from being overcome. On closer examination, however, Peace's vision has changed profoundly. The thematic focus of the novel is different, more political, this time, and related to a supposed conspiracy involving Japan, the US and Soviet Union together. Peace chooses to concentrate on the so called "Teigin incident", the real-life poisoning of 12 bank workers that took place in 1948 at Teikoku



Bank and whose reasons have never been uncovered.<sup>7</sup> There was a confession, provided by the painter and artist Sadamichi Hirasawa. Though he was sentenced to death in 1950, many people believed he was innocent and his lawyers presented something like 19 appeals. Even so, he spent 40 years in jail, before dying of pneumonia, taking his secret with him. Apparently Peace is among those believing that Hirasawa Sadamichi was innocent, and suggesting instead that the Teigin incident was connected to the work of Unit 731, a covert Japanese division allegedly studying wartime chemical and biological weapons, and secretly experimenting them on war prisoners, both civilians and soldiers, basically in the Province of Manchuria, well before the Japanese surrender (Purdon 2009). The method of poisoning in particular seems to point to the involvement of the covert wartime chemical and biological weapons division operating in Japan. The police cover-up given to the incident supports the hypothesis of an actual conspiracy to hide the truth and protect the military information "held by the ex.731 cabal" (Meek 2009) involving American, Soviet and Japanese leaders all together.

In reporting his personal view of this specific historical occurrence, Peace emphasizes the deliberate attitude implied in the act of poisoning rather than insisting on the notion of the infection that may result from it. In providing his own, documented interpretation of a true-life poisoning and consequently of the military-industrial conspiracy related to it, the novelist takes a position and suggests that the act of poisoning may be read as a deliberate retribution for some form of suffered evil, calling for a reaction. It seems to me that, for the first time in Peace's novels, the victim strikes back. As with the gift of the Greek tragic heroine Medea to her lover's new, young bride,<sup>8</sup> poisoning is presented by Peace as an *active murder*, the final and accurately planned result of a sequence of acts eventually resulting in the physical removal of one's enemy.<sup>9</sup>

As happens with the Greek tragedy<sup>10</sup> and the myth of Medea in particular, Peace chooses to privilege, in his story, poisoning (seen as active, planned and willed evil)

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<sup>7</sup> As Purdon writes, "... in 1948, dressed as a government medical officer, a man walks into a downtown branch of the Teikoku bank. Warning against an outbreak of dysentery, he explains that he has been sent to inoculate the bank's staff, who then willingly drink the poison he pours into their teacups. Sixteen drink. Twelve suffer a wretched, painful death" (Purdon 2009).

<sup>8</sup> In the Greek myth as well as in the tragedy by Euripides, Medea has her children bear a gift to her previous lover Jason's young bride, Glauce: the Nessun shirt, a garment drenched in the blood of a dying centaur and therefore poisonous for whoever wears it.

<sup>9</sup> On the relevance and meaning of poisoning in the Greek myth and tragedy, see Trestrail (2007: 4-6).

<sup>10</sup> Reflecting on the contiguities between Greek tragedy and crime fiction, Hoffman (2013) sums up the position of many novelists and scholars – among whom Chesterton, W. Auden, F Durenmatt and U. Eco – repeating what most of them had stated in terms of the similarity between classical tragedy and the formulae of crime fiction, while Aisenberg states that "Clearly the detective novel and the tragedy must face common questions" (Aisenberg 1980: 26).



rather than infection (made possible, in the novelist's view, by the victim's extreme frailty and inability to react to contagion).

## 2. AFTER YEAR ZERO: FROM INFECTION TO POISONING.

Because of you. The city is a coffin. In the snow. In the back of a truck. Parked outside the bank. In the sleet. Under the heavy damp tarpaulin. Driven through the streets. In the rain. To the hospital. To the morgue. In the sleet. To the mortuary. To the temple. In the snow. To the crematorium. To the earth and to the sky – (Peace 2009: 5)

The dark and decaying city portrayed here closely resembles the urban landscape already made familiar by *Tokyo Year Zero*: there seems to be no sign of rebirth, people are as poor as they used to be and the sense of a secret power, silently controlling everybody's life has been made, if possible, even more intense. The Year of the Dog has been followed by the Year of the Rat, (as it is to be according to the complex cosmology of Japanese culture, whatever the symbolic implications of this natural transition). The notion of poisoning is suggested right at the beginning of the story, through the reconstruction of the Teikoku Bank crime:

We all watch as our killer turns to Miss Akuzawa, as our killer asks her to bring enough teacups for all the members of the branch (...) Miss Akuzawa fetches sixteen teacups on a tray (...) Our killer opens the smaller bottle marked FIRST DRUG (...) Our killer asks if everybody is here (Peace 2009: 25).

In the elaborate description of the Teigin incident, the symbolic switch from *Tokyo Year Zero* to *Occupied City* reveals Peace's clear intention to work less on the dissipation of Japanese cultural and political life than on the network of spy games and international malpractices marking the end of the war and tacitly posited as the prevailing tools and methods of wartime in both imperial Japan and the period immediately following Japanese defeat. In order to focus on this specific aspect of the historical context, Peace suggests a connection between the killer of Teikoku Bank and the Japanese biological division that was operational in the province of Manchuria. The division was said to practice experiments in human vivisection (obviously without anaesthetics), to try out anthrax-poisoning on live prisoners and eventually to breed plague-infected rats to spread the disease in China and abroad. The secrecy of the project was protected by an equally secret, and shameful, alliance between the occupying American forces and the Japanese doctors running the experiments. What is more, "Also the Russians probably knew and deliberately chose to cover the whole of the operation until the Japanese surrendered on board battleship Missouri" (Cartwright 2010). Drawing a lot on the conspiracy theory developing in the US and



connected in many ways to the birth of the CIA (1947),<sup>11</sup> Peace accurately recapitulates on the events that led to the sudden awareness of the Manchurian experiment. In doing so, he finds, maybe predictably, a very handy and familiar metaphor in the idea of poisoning as both a medical process and a metaphoric representation of this second step in Japanese reality during those very complex years.

IN THE OCCUPIED CITY, I wake up. It is cold, in the Occupied City. It is Monday and I do not want to get up. I do not want to get dressed. I do not want to go to work. *Something is wrong.* I want to lie all day beneath this quilt. To sleep and to dream, of food and warmth, of the man who will come and take me away from the cold and the hunger, of the man on a white horse who will save me from the Occupied City. But I must get up. I must get dressed. I must eat breakfast and leave for work. For it is Monday.

Monday 26 January 1948. (Peace 2009: 48)

The locution “something is wrong”, obsessively repeated all through the chapter entitled “The Third Candle – The Testimony of a Survivor” (from which the above quotation is taken), hints at an obscure responsibility, that is felt, though not fully understood, by one of the victims telling his story. The notion of poisoning, in the way it is articulated here, works cunningly and at multiple levels: medical, social, and political. Poisoned bodies combine with, and result from, poisoned data, laboriously hidden through the police cover-up, which in turn is meant to hide the true responsibilities of the US secret service in the whole operation. In investigating this delicate issue, Peace wields the scalpel as no one else does. His familiar idea of infection is not removed but it is now connected to the notion of plague:

In the history of the world, there have been as many plagues as there have been wars. They rise and they triumph, then they decline and they disappear. But they always return, plagues and wars. They always return, these plagues and wars, to take men equally by surprise. Until now, now men have married plague and war in an unholy, godless matrimony. (Peace 2009: 100)

In “The Fourth Candle – The (Dead) Letters of an American”, the unveiling of a possible conspiracy triggers a meditation on the nature of wars in contemporary times by one of the narrating voices – the American Murray Thompson. A new element is added here, to complement the fresco of post-war Tokyo. From the Japanese point of view, if anything else, what happened in the two years between the bombing (and from Peace’s first novel in the series) to the Year of the Rat (and *Occupied City*) is a switch from the passive suffering of the occupation (the American infection) to the active enactment of a murderous action (the poisoning). This murderous action is related to the condition of being at war and it mows down victims – both Japanese

<sup>11</sup> On this issue, see Johnson 1983 and West 2003.



and American – that are not accidental but deliberately chosen for a specific purpose. And they take their role, accepting the schedule implied in their position in the power hierarchy.

I SUBMIT TO THEIR EXAMINATIONS And when she got to the stars, they were just little white lice stuck on a piece of dirty old black cloth like I used to love you I  
SUBMIT TO THEIR TESTS So the little girl went back to Japan, but Japan was just an overturned pot of nothing like I loved you before I SUBMIT TO THEIR EXPERIMENTS The little girl was completely alone now, and so she sat down and cried but most of all, I want you to love me I SUBMIT TO THEIR TRIALS She's sitting there still, all alone, still crying I want you to love me IN ROWS, IN CAGES, A DOG.  
(Peace 2009: 205)

The locution "I SUBMIT TO", in capital letters and obsessively repeated, conjures up images of imprisonment and punishment, implying the presence of a torturer and an evil action that is obviously an act of will and specifically oriented. The secret plan of deliberate contamination, whether connected to warlike experimentation or to a bank poisoning, develops a multi-layered narrative where the contagion of death metaphorically travels from the individual body of a bank worker to the whole of the community, sweeping with it the military scientist and the detective, the killer and his victims in the flow of infected data through an infected polis (Purdon 2009). Again, as happens in *The Red Riding Quartet*, the virus of corruption spreads in the way of a plague. However, as we have said, poisoning presupposes a project and an agent, therefore a plot that is in this case a highly political one, supported by some well-devised spy work. The secret head of the conspiracy must occupy a very high position in the ranks of US Army military if nobody – and least of all the good-meaning though helpless Murray Thompson – succeeds in unveiling the plot. All prove totally unable to expose the criminals and must eventually give in, removing their voices from the historical record of the incident.

We will go back to characters later on. For the time being, suffice it to notice that also in this respect the differences between *Occupied City* and *Tokyo Year Zero* are profound and undeniable. In the second novel of the series, there seems to be no trace of a character reminiscent of "Detective Minami, the tired and disillusioned policeman nursing his old wounds and frantically hiding he was a war criminal himself, in China, before his city was bombed to scratch and the actual power was divided between the occupying American army and the usual Japanese criminals" (Meek 2009). Caught between the old world and the new one, pinned to an old-fashioned devotion to investigation in itself and at the same time fully aware of how nonsensical his work is, Minami would have been a very effective protagonist for a series, had he not been hopelessly lost at the end of the book.<sup>12</sup> We do not really know whether he survives his

<sup>12</sup> Again, this issue is developed at large in N. Vallorani "Serializing Evil. David Peace and the



frantic if hopeless search for the killer of prostitutes, but what we do realize for sure is that he is no longer able to control himself. He seems to walk on the edge of self-destruction, if not physical, at least psychological and social.

*I pick up the razor. Nobody knows my name. Everybody knows my name. I open up the razor. Nobody cares. Everybody cares. I untie the kimono. The day is night. The night is day. The yellow and dark-blue striped kimono. Black is white. White is black. It falls open. The men are the women. The women are the men. The razor in my right hand. The brave are the frightened. The frightened are the brave. I lower my right hand. The strong are the weak. The weak are the strong. I lower the razor. The good are the bad. The bad are the good. The blade touches my skin. Communists should be set free. Communists should be locked up. I lift up my cock with my left hand. Strikes are legal. Strikes are illegal. The blade is cold. Democracy is good. Democracy is bad. My mouth is dry. The aggressor is the victim. The victim is the aggressor. My stomach aches. The winners are the losers. The losers are the winners. My heart aches. Japan lost the war. Japan won the war. I start to cut. The living are the dead –*

*I cut and I cut and I cut and I cut and I cut...*

Until the dead are the living. *I cut ... I am one of the survivors!* (Peace 2007: 368)

*Occupied City* opens with a totally different set of characters: a writer who is trying to tell the story of the Teigin incident; Lt Gen Shiro Ishii, a prisoner presumably involved in the conspiracy; Murray Thompson, the American agent supposedly in charge of investigating the incident. One of them, however, can be compared with Detective Minami. Murray Thompson shares at least one characteristic with him: he is equally helpless, trapped in the chinks of a hierarchy that he does not understand any longer and to which he is supposed to bow down. He appears as the one resisting the contagion of power but proving to be too weak to react and therefore doomed to surrender to it.

And I see visions, visions of plagues, my eyes open / my eyes closed, the same visions. The dead rat on the stair, gray and yellow, the cat convulsing in the kitchen, a bloody red flower blossoming in its mouth. That is how it will start. The rats in the daylight, from out of the walls, from under the floors, they will first come in files, and then die in piles, six thousand dead in one day, burnt in bonfires through the night, and then the rats will be gone and the fevers will start, the swellings and the vomiting, the yellow and the gray, before the asphyxiation and then the death, the red and black death, the red and black death of the people, death of this city, this gray and yellow city of gray and yellow eyes, then red and black eyes, of yellow blossoms and red flowers here and there, on the corners and in the doorways, this gray and yellow, red and black city wherein men will take to

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Formulae of Crime Fiction" (forthcoming).



their beds and leave them on stretchers, in coffins, in hearses, until there are no more stretchers, no more coffins and no more hearses. (Peace 2009: 100-101)

In the flurry of letters, private and institutional, telling the story of the last days of Murray Thompson, Peace exploits a whole set of registers, including official reports, top-secret revelations, messages to friends and to a beloved wife. All of them depict a man slowly drifting towards the loss of his institutional and military loyalties and eventually surrendering to his own death as a necessary event. The chapter, together with Murray's life, is concluded by “– Stamped , MISSION TERMINATED, 2/27/48 –”, and one of the narrating voices ends up buried among the American government's classified files, to be replaced by “The Man in the Shrine”, the protagonist of the following chapter.

### 3. IN THE GROVE OF SPY WORK

Peace's narrative tends to be polyphonic, multilevel, and sometimes convoluted; at least this much is commonly agreed. Despite the intense criticism of his stylistic complexities sometimes brought on, the novelist seems determined to hold the reader's attention combining registers, voices, typographical resources and rhythms.<sup>13</sup> Polyphony in particular, in *Occupied City*, is posited as a deliberate authorial choice. It takes the shape of three primary – though not exclusive – narrative voices, often competing with each other and simply distinguished typographically). Here as in *Tokyo Year Zero*, while the narration unfolds, the steady, thickening rhetorical figures such as those of anadiplosis, anaphora and antistrophe contribute to complicating the pattern, also obliging the reader to do something that is always needed while reading Peace: rely less on the rational understanding of the story than on the pleasure of the rhythm.

As happens in music, the reader has to become attuned to it; otherwise he/she is hopelessly lost.

In the case of *Occupied City*, however, Peace's strategy is somewhat abridged by his explicit intention to pay homage to a very famous Japanese novelist and artist, Akutagawa Ryunosuke, and in particular to his short story “In the Grove”, comparatively unknown in the Western world until it was made famous by Akira Kurosawa's film adaptation entitled *Rashomon*, released in 1950. What was interesting in Akutagawa Ryunosuke's work – and what Peace decides to borrow – is the device of several conflicting narratives reporting the same facts. The multivocal tale that results

<sup>13</sup> Whether successful or not, it is probably up to the reader to decide, even though Meek, in his essay for the *London Review of Books*, makes his position clear, marking Peace's stylistic choices as “a bit too much” even for the experienced reader (2009).



from this stylistic strategy is impressive. In a sort of literary forensic, twelve voices contribute to the portrayal, at the same time choral but intensely fragmented, of the same event, also suggesting a few interesting views of how two highly different cultures were facing each other a few years after World War II.

Precisely Akutagawa's model, at the same time sophisticated and made familiar to the general public by a very popular film, makes for a novel that proves to be more accommodating than *Tokyo Year Zero* (or the *Red Riding Quartet*, for that matter), though keeping the choice of style that is Peace's trademark, his personal way of resisting the "frustration at the expressive constraints of the crime thriller, even an impatience with the limits of fiction itself" (Meek 2009).<sup>14</sup>

Technically, the main voices interweaving in the novel are three. The first one to be heard is that of the writer-character, a narrative profile that, according to some critics, must have been conceived as Peace's *doppelganger*, a *dybbuk* providing some insights into the work of the author while piecing together this complex story. Meek defines this character as a traveller whose mental journey in search of the truth has led him through a Dantean underworld, poorly lit and weakly organized (Meek 2009). The writer "reads about an old Japanese ghost-story game, played with as many candles as storytellers, where, after each participant has told their story, a candle is snuffed out and the room grows darker" (Meek 2009). The story comes true when the writer happens to be at the Black Gate, a quarter in Tokyo, while a medium is summoning spirits that are supposed to be participating in a kind of story game. And of course the conjured souls, one by one, are the victims of the Teikoku Bank poisoning, providing their testimonies, which constitute the chapters of the book. "The stories begin and end with the murder victims; in between we hear from two of the detectives who investigated the case, the convicted culprit, a gangster businessman, and Soviet and American biowarfare specialists, among others" (Meek 2009). Obviously enough, the writer-character also coordinates the story. A faint echo of Calvino's *Invisible cities* may be identified in this device, but Peace succeeds in creating his own atmosphere, revealing a unique narrative voice that multiplies and branches out into many different voices, recounting "different facets of Tokyo – the Occupied City, the Occult City, the Posthumous City – and to display a virtuosity with different styles" (Meek 2009). Around the writer-character, in fact, coalesce the "participants in the case, including a survivor, a reporter, a former gangster, Col Murray Thompson himself, two detectives, the convicted man and even the imagined real killer slightly" (Cartwright 2010). We know that two of them – Murray Thompson and Shiro Ishii – acquire more relevance than the others in the process of infiltrating the mystery of the conspiracy, but each voice has its own role in contributing to the enthralling narrative of *Occupied City*. Therefore, while it is true that the writer-character collates the various sections of the novel, coordinating the several voices, he has to share his role of protagonist with

<sup>14</sup> Meek also emphasizes the global coherence of Peace's style: "Even at his worst, Peace is a tight, disciplined writer" (2009).



these two characters, who are ethnically and culturally very different, both fated to be defeated, though standing on opposite sides of the fence. Lt Gen Shiro Ishii, the Japanese officer allegedly responsible for the secret experiments taking place in Manchuria, is being held under house arrest and of course regularly faced with the American and Russian investigators. Notwithstanding their stubbornness and the experienced efficiency of their methods, Shiro Ishii succeeds in faking amnesia until he is promised immunity. His specular character is the already mentioned Col. Murray Thompson, a profile born from the conflation of two American experts, both in charge of the case, at different times. The first of them, Dr Murray Sanders, strongly opposed Ishii's immunity, and was then replaced by Dr Arvo Thompson, who apparently committed suicide before managing to unveil the plot. In the book, Murray Thompson also dies, but he is killed: poisoned, by the way, to make sure he will not reveal what he knows. From the despairing letters written to his wife and his superiors we know that Thompson – at least in Peace – suggested "the arrangement" of granting immunity to Shiro Ishii before becoming aware of the "human guinea pigs" used in Manchuria (Cartwright 2010).

Polyphony of course requires a multiplicity of languages and styles, and a refined technique that is fairly unfamiliar in an allegedly popular genre such as crime fiction. Peace solves the problem by simply choosing to ignore that the borders between crime fiction and other genres exist, and openly courting poetry in much of his prose and in *Occupied City* in particular. This is Meek's position on the issue, in particular because, maybe, "the novel as collection-of-poems-and-prose is where a novelist takes shelter during the periods when the prose can't seem to take the weight of the stories any more. It doesn't always succeed, and it is not easy to read, but what it is trying to do is ambitious. The rhythms of its framing passages are poets' rhythms; its repetitions are choruses" (Meek 2009).

"The ranking of literary genres or authors in a hierarchy analogous to social classes," claim Stallybrass and White, "is a particularly clear example of a much broader and more complex cultural process whereby the human body, psychic forms, geographical space and the social formations are all constructed within interrelated and dependent hierarchies of high and low" (Stallybrass & White 1986: 2-3). Peace pays no regard to this distinction between high and low and both in contents and in terms of style he openly suggests that literature – and crime fiction within it – works in a universal dimension where such a difference is not relevant. What is relevant instead is the way in which each voice in the story fills in a gap, providing a different insight into the plot. Voices rise from everywhere, to confirm or to contradict the words of the three leading characters. Again, the structure of classical tragedy is replicated here: the protagonists' actions are commented on and supported by a chorus, providing the point of view of the community, which is ready either to celebrate or to mourn, according to the needs of the plot.



In the last few pages, in a chapter called "The Twelfth and Final Candle – The Lamentations", a female voice arises in a landscape of water that closely recalls the finding of the first corpse in *Tokyo Year Zero*:

'This city is a river,' I hear you say. 'Made of blood and made of sweat, made of shit and made of piss, it is the Sumida River.'

'And with its blood and with its sweat, with its shit and with its piss, the river is this city, the Occupied City'. (Peace 2009: 262)

The "mad woman" lyrically recapitulating the fate of the victims incarnates the universal, defeated femininity of a Greek tragedy, an oriental Medea claiming for her right to be a mother and a wife:

'I am a mother,' I say, 'and I am a sister. And I am a lover. And I am a wife. And I am a daughter ...'

'I am a sister and I am searching for my brother. My brother who was taken from me in this city ...'

'I am a lover and I am searching for my man. My man who was taken from me in this city ...'

'I am a wife and I am searching for my husband. My husband who was taken from me in this city ...'

'I am a daughter and I am searching for my father. My father who was taken from me in this city ...'

'Through earthquake and through war, we have walked these streets, the banks of this river, and we have survived.'

(...)

'Conquered from birth, colonized for life, I have always, already been defeated. Always, already been occupied – 'Occupied by you –'

(...)

'In the snow. In the mud. Beneath the branches. Before the shrine. In the genkan. In the bank. On a street in China. In a wardrobe in Tokyo. With your poison. With your pen' (Peace 2009, 268-269).

Meek, often sharply critical of Peace's narrative choices, states that "The book's strength is its end, thoughtful and poignant, written with compassion and an uncharacteristically complex feminine voice that offers hope of richer books to come from a novelist who has until now been relentlessly masculine" (Meek 2009). The actual point, I would say, is that this voice cuts across social, national, even gender differences, combining the high and the low, the polite and the vulgar, the torturer and the victim, redefining what is to be a human being and the stating a truth that is, simply enough, the universal stance of the defeated.



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