



# Fear and loathing in Buenos Aires

## Novel

THE DEVIL'S TRILL  
By Daniel Moyano  
Serpent's Tail/119 pages/\$24.90

Patrick Lambe

TRICLINIO is an unlikely sort of hero for a novel about the effects of the military dictatorships of the '60s and early '70s in Argentina.

He is a meandering and not entirely with-it violinist who was born in a city in the deserts of the interior.

And indeed, "hero" may not be the right word for a man who wanders largely passive and unaware through his tank-ridden hometown, Buenos Aires, hearing only music in his head, seeking only to play the violin.

Only once or twice in the entire novel does he initiate action of his own accord. There is only one remotely heroic act where, realising the oppression around him, he spends days tuning his violin to the real world.

With his theme, "I have a doll dressed in blue", he succeeds in leading, Pied Piper-like, the torturers of Buenos Aires together with their electric prods and instruments of spiritual destruction, down to the harbour, where they and their tools are drowned in the waters of the

River Plate.

His act of liberation restores only a limited transparency to the air; the government bans music altogether, and soon everything is as opaque as before... from the factories come the frenzied beating of hammers, the grating of metal, as new instruments of torture are manufactured.

At first sight, this looks like a novel almost entirely without literary technique. The writing is pared to the bone, description is minimal, and the sense of Triclinio as a man who "floats" through life out of touch with passion, desire or even shock, is mirrored in the matter-of-fact, distant way in which Moyano narrates his story.

Reading the novel is almost like sitting by a fire and hearing Moyano tell a story he once heard. In its stark simplicity, it is inviting in a way quite different from a novel of suspense or a story of passion and revenge (there is neither here).

Feelings and emotions are almost completely absent, which is startling for a book so obviously rooted in the terrible inhumanity of a totalitarian regime which uses torture, repression and lies as routine.

And when feelings are alluded to, in the most tangential way, they have, curiously enough, little to do with the main themes of the novel.

Palira, the social worker who falls in love with Triclinio, weeps as he leaves her, sewing her *trousseau*, for an evening on the town with Ufa, daughter of the soon-to-be-deposed

president.

The same president drops a single tear on a record of the Violin Adagio by Albinoni, which he is broadcasting on the last loyal radio station while he waits, barricaded in his room, for the next president and the accompanying nerve gas.

In the same way, although the repression of the dictatorship pervades every page of the novel, there is no graphic description of specific acts of violence or torture which might arouse feelings of shock or outrage in the reader.

Indeed, the greater the violence described, the greater the dream-like, fantasy quality of the narrative.

Only once, during a brilliant violin recital given by Triclinio for the president, do the pillars of the palace shake, caused, Triclinio later discovers, by the torturers at work below on a young and promising violinist.

It takes time for Triclinio to discover things. When he takes up residence in a town of former violinists outside Buenos Aires, they tell him, and he assumes, that they are all unable to play the violin because they are all crippled by arthritis; the truth is that they have had their fingers mangled by the security police, who mistrust their radical musical tastes.

This deliberate lack of passion, and the attempt to keep the reader distanced from the horrors of the regime, creates a curious impression of anaesthesia, of really not

being in touch with what is happening, and a pervasive sense of fantasy and unreality.

And this is, perhaps, the real power of this novel, because as a result the narrative itself both describes and induces the effects of institutionalised inhumanity and repression.

Violinville, the ghetto of radical musicians to which Triclinio eventually returns, is ultimately a metaphor for the exile in Spain which Daniel Moyano himself chose in 1976.

An opponent and victim of the Argentine regime himself, Moyano seems curiously inert about his own feelings. The assumption one makes that exiles are going to continue being opponents of the regime from another country is dispelled by his depiction of Violinville as a town of harmless eccentrics attempting to smuggle *avant garde* music into the classical repertoire played in the city.

This is a powerful novel well worth reading. As a novel of political instability and routine institutionalised barbarism, it may have little to do with Singapore, except perhaps for those who remember the Japanese Occupation; but as a novel of exile and alienation from one's cultural heritage, it may say much.

Patrick Lambe, a philosophy and theology graduate from Oxford, teaches English at a private school in Singapore.

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