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**Seductive Narratives: On Human Rights, Bestsellers,
and Hope**

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Hernán Vidal raises a number of important questions about Ariel Dorfman as a public figure and about the discourses of history, politics, and human rights that have contributed to the writer's success. Dorfman, a professor at Duke University and one of the best known Chilean writers outside of Chile, has published dozens of books in every genre: novels, plays, poetry, and essays. The latter have appeared in such major news outlets as, among others, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *El País*, *Harper's*, and *The Nation*. Vidal is particularly interested in the representation of history to be found in Dorfman's interviews in English and in his autobiography, *Heading South, Looking North*, wherein he finds numerous contradictions that arise from the author's various statements about history and politics. And while Vidal generously (albeit surprisingly and perhaps a bit ironically) finds a residue of hope in Dorfman's steadfast commitment to "engage the world as it is" (8), he suggests that the author's attempts to do so have come up short. Vidal shows how Dorfman's autobiographical narrative rests on a simplification of history and, perhaps even more importantly, an abandonment of modernity's revolutionary utopias and an inability to fully engage what Vidal calls "the last utopia surviving Modernity" (18), the human rights movement. With this essay, Vidal opens a timely and relevant discussion about what kinds of statements about history—specifically Chile's experiment with socialism that ended with the long military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet and the compromised return to democracy—are appealing to the broad audience targeted by Dorfman. His critique, however, also raises questions about what kinds of narratives *should* be constructed around post-Allende Chilean history.

Exile, Intellectuals, and the Memory Wars
Hispanic Issues On Line Debates 5 (2012)

Interestingly enough, Vidal frames his analysis in terms of Dorfman's "professional public persona construction" (4), as opposed to, say, "the public intellectual." The latter would assume Dorfman's good faith efforts to further human knowledge and understanding, specifically about dictatorship, and in fact Dorfman self-identifies as a public intellectual on his website. One might even compare Dorfman to Edward Said, a Palestinian exile who also wrote from academia to a broader public about the particular legacies of East-West relations in general and the Israel-Palestine conflict in particular. For Dorfman, too, is an exile; his writing explores the legacies of dictatorship and human rights abuses in Chile, and by extension, throughout the region. Both Dorfman and Said—writers, academics, public intellectuals—underscore the importance of the outside perspective and critical distance exiles provide. In addition to his literary and academic approaches to the topic, Dorfman (like Said) utilizes his own personal story to communicate painful material to a broad audience. Telling his own unique iteration of a broader story about revolutionary hopes dashed by a brutal military takeover and the particular hardships of political exile has surely raised awareness in the West about human rights violations in Chile.

This task of consciousness raising was assumed by thousands of political dissidents who left the country after the coup, whether they were officially exiled by the regime or left of their own accord—some out of fear for their own safety, others precisely in order to lobby for intervention from the international community. Still others, finding themselves already abroad for other reasons, used their freedom of speech in exile to denounce the dictatorship. Vidal himself has written prolifically and insightfully on the same history, though unlike Dorfman he does not share his personal story and maintains his critique of Chilean history and society in purely academic terms. His work, too, has contributed to our collective understanding—in Chile and in the United States—of the human rights crises and the varied political and cultural responses during and after the dictatorship. Dorfman, though, has been particularly successful in generating international awareness from his position at Duke and through mainstream media outlets: in addition to his autobiography and the interviews cited by Vidal, his literature is explicitly political; he is the subject of a POV documentary on PBS; Duke recently funded a return trip to Chile to make (with his son as the producer) a video recreation of his experiences on the day of the coup and the day of his return from exile years later (which can be viewed on his Duke website). Though Vidal says little to acknowledge this, Dorfman, as public intellectual, has continually contributed to the public's knowledge and understanding about the human rights abuses of the Pinochet dictatorship, the traumatic legacies of torture, the hardships of exile, and the challenges of a redemocratization process compromised by the tacit agreements between the new leadership and the former military leaders. In

addition to his literary exploration of other perspectives, he has done this through telling and retelling his own individual story.

By employing the paradigm of “persona construction,” however, Vidal sidesteps the question of Dorfman’s undeniable contributions to the human rights movement in this sense, and instead problematizes Dorfman’s compelling personal story and the contradictions that are glossed over in the multiple retellings of it. On the one hand, this deployment of a theoretical apparatus derived from the business world (Vidal’s cited source is a 2005 article by Laura Morgan Roberts) seems cynical, and implies (without stating) that what Dorfman says and does is motivated by an egotistical desire for recognition and an ambitious drive for (political, economic, social) success. On the other hand, however unfair the move to align Dorfman with reigning power structures may appear, it is surely fair game to question the basis for the appeal of Dorfman’s narrative, which—in many ways much like the novels and speaking tours of his compatriot Isabel Allende—has reached bestseller status. While this is not exactly Vidal’s ultimate goal—which is, rather, to problematize Dorfman’s representation of history and put forth the epistemological basis of the human rights movement as a more politically relevant alternative—Vidal’s point of entry into Dorfman’s work does beg the question as to what narratives about Chilean history are in fact the most compelling and whether or not Dorfman’s politics are potentially effective.

Vidal recognizes the performative nature of identity creation—as does Dorfman explicitly in his autobiography. Vidal insists that the public figure, always on stage, so to speak, is forever aware of the expectations of the audience, but curiously enough, he does not define Dorfman’s public, referring only to “power groups” (4) that have (by Dorfman’s own admission) shaped and reshaped his identity. Vidal does not name the power groups he has in mind, but presumably, beyond the different social and cultural contexts to which Dorfman has had to adapt over the course of his nomadic life, they also include the administrators, faculty, and students at Duke; the editors and audiences of the newspapers and magazines in which Dorfman publishes op-ed pieces; the mainstream presses that publish his books (Viking-Penguin; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Pantheon Books; Duke University Press) and the readers who purchase them; the university professors and high-school teachers who have adapted his work to teach the history of dictatorship; the theater and cinema communities that have embraced his work (his now canonical *Death and the Maiden* is not only a Roman Polanski film starring Sigourney Weaver and Ben Kingsley [1994], but has played in countless countries and is set to reopen on the London stage in 2012). While the play was a flop in Santiago in 1992—a point to which I will return below—it has captured the imagination of audiences worldwide. Vidal is critical of Dorfman’s self-professed need to appeal to different publics, but the question remains as to what it is about Dorfman’s

narratives that makes his own stories and the particular way he represents history so deeply appealing?

Vidal looks for answers not in Dorfman's literature, which he dismisses as "highly allegorical and open to multiple and contradictory interpretations" (4). Vidal's desire to focus only on how Dorfman has represented his own story makes for an interesting approach, as Dorfman has reiterated his own experience over and over, sharing with the public his pain, his insecurities, and the difficult work of coming to terms with the human capacity for violence. Dorfman's "September 11th" story—that is, his own personal experience that he has made public through repeated retellings—in fact does resonate with multiple audiences in its many facets, beyond any recourse to the politics of either September 11th—1973 or 2001. These include his family's long history of exile fleeing both political persecution for leftist ideals and religious intolerance in the wake of anti-Semitism; the chance coincidence that he was not at the presidential palace when it was bombed and thus was spared probable execution but not the survivor's guilt that so many suffer in similar circumstances; the familial connection to both the United States and Chile that make his insight into "the other September 11" (that is, into both) particularly poignant, capturing all of the ironies of history and power at play in both events; the advantages and challenges of bilingualism, two languages competing for the allegiance of a man who knows that the choice between English and Spanish is about power as well as affect and identity. The multi-faceted nature of the story is surely a factor in making Dorfman's story resonate with so many audiences internationally.

Cutting through the emotional appeal of the story, however, Vidal identifies in Dorfman's public statements a "garbled" (6) discourse on free-will and history, and he points out how Dorfman flip-flops between a sense that occult forces are at work in history, designing a specific fate for him—which is to be the storyteller who will narrate this fundamentally important history—and the conviction that one does have control over one's destiny. Vidal clearly prefers the Dorfman who does not resign himself to fate and who instead asserts his own agency, concluding that, "This ['engagement of the world as it is'] is the only wisp of hope I found in the personae constructed in his interviews" (8). Vidal is not sympathetic to Dorfman's attempts to make sense of his own place in history, which is surely a large part of the broad appeal of his discourse, echoing as it does the discourses of mourning of the Left's disillusionment with revolutionary metanarratives. Vidal demands instead a rigorous examination of both Right and Left from the perspective of the human rights movement. He explains how

with brutal realism the [human rights] movement recognizes that severe violations of human rights have occurred from time immemorial, are occurring right now, and will continue to occur indefinitely into the future. Any of us, under the right circumstances, could commit abject

atrocities. Yet at the core of this nihilism there is a spark of hope that has propelled the formation of a world civil society represented by thousands of non-governmental organizations and coalitions of NGOs that tackle violations of human rights in a concerted way beyond national boundaries. (18)

Vidal grants that the human rights movement and Dorfman's work share the same ethical core, but insists on the inherent esthetic difference between the movement's political realism and Dorfman's "romantic nihilism in which unreason leaps over and against the teleology of history and politics as apprehended by reasons of State" (18). Vidal derides what he calls Dorfman's Gnosticism, but his positioning of the human rights movement as essentially a set of organizations and institutions determined to redeem humanity for their inevitable sin smacks of religious redemption.

What follows is Vidal's critique of the revolutionary Left in Chile and an almost surprising insistence that those who took part in this history ought to lay a critical gaze on the possibility of atrocities committed by the Left as well as the Right. Such critical work is surely warranted to move beyond the impasse of good and evil, Left and Right that is so easy to fall into in the wake of abuses that occurred during the Pinochet years, violence that, as Vidal is well aware, vastly surpassed in quantity and sadistic quality anything anyone could have imagined, even within the armed factions of the Left. To level this particular critique at Dorfman, however, seems to beg the question as to how the author could construct his own story differently so as to take into account Vidal's demands. Should he renounce his own youthful idealism and confess that he himself could have been capable of violent purges had the tables been turned? One wonders indeed how Vidal might represent his own life story in relation to the history he too has lived. Or perhaps the personal ought to be off limits in a purely rational evaluation of history, but does the violence of history not demand a personal narrative to come to terms with its abuses and understand the excess that breaks down the façade of rational civilization, of Modernity?

Furthermore, while Vidal is quick to dismiss Dorfman's literature—which, in addition to being allegorical and ambiguous he considers "shamanistic" in its dialogic efforts to give voice to the dead—it is precisely in his literature where the ambiguities of human nature are explored. Vidal mentions *Death and the Maiden* and Dorfman's own struggle to understand the dismal reception of this play in a newly redemocratized Santiago. Vidal accepts Dorfman's explanations about how the Left in Chile was too concerned about its compromises with the military to address the issues brought up in the play. *La muerte y la doncella* explicitly challenges the decision of the center-left coalition of the Transition government, the *Concertación*, to investigate only the human rights abuses resulting in death, ignoring—and thus silencing—the victims of torture. (The government did

not attempt to remedy this until 2003, when the Valech Commission extended the work of the Rettig Commission to include victims of political prison and torture). Crediting Dorfman with his stinging attack on the new center-left governing coalition and seemingly understanding of Dorfman's sense of betrayal when his play failed dismally to inspire the kinds of conversations so desperately needed to heal the wounds of the past, Vidal fails to read the discourse of the play in terms of the discourse of human rights.

In the play, the female protagonist, Paulina, finds herself confronted with the man who raped and tortured her repeatedly in prison over a decade previous. She recognizes his voice. With this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for revenge, she takes him captive and attempts to force a confession from him. Her husband, who has just accepted a job as the head of a commission identical to Chile's Rettig Commission, tries to talk to her rationally and convince her not to replicate the crimes of the past. Indeed, his human rights discourse eventually succeeds and she decides not to kill her rapist, though not until she has succeeded in exacting his bone chilling confession of his all too fallible humanity. His motives, he reveals, were not grounded in politics at all, but rather in the overwhelming pressure to participate in the carnage and the obscene temptation that a woman's helpless naked body incited. This doctor, with his refined musical taste—he always played Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* while he raped—exposes the barbarity always lurking amidst the most civilized of facades. And the protagonist's own instinct toward vengeance over justice surely at least begins to blur the distinction between martyred Left and vicious Right. Indeed, one imagines this moral ambiguity was a factor in the play's initial failure to reach audiences in a nation still reeling from sixteen years of dictatorship. Vidal's aversion to the personal and psychological runs a similar risk of oversimplification of history that he levels at Dorfman. If Dorfman has not rallied sufficiently around the cause of the human rights movement, Vidal fails to allow for a cultural medium—literature—where all human complexity exceeds the limits of any attempt by Modernity to circumscribe it. It is this postmodernity inherent in Dorfman's thinking and writing that resists reduction to any one political discourse, that of the human rights movement or any other.

The last vestige of hope that I see in Dorfman's writing is precisely his good faith effort to think and rethink his own human fallibility and to utilize his location from within power groups to disseminate that constantly evolving story. The failures of his writing that I perceive do not lie in his misalignment with the supposed utopianism of the human rights movement. An entirely different critique of Dorfman's overall project might be to cast a critical glance on the representation of gender in his story. As Vidal notes, Dorfman claims in his autobiography that his own thinking about gender has evolved from his 1970s-era idealization of woman as the embodiment of

nature. He may well be aware that his own thinking has been problematic, but even a novel as recent as *The Nanny and the Iceberg* (1999)—another fictional exploration of 1990s Chile, this time constructed around the nation’s perverse project of representing Chile at the 1992 World Fair in Seville with the distinctly non-tropical display of an iceberg wrenched from Antarctica. The main character, conceived the day of Che Guevara’s death, returns from exile as an anxiety-filled virgin who cannot consummate a relationship until he overcomes the impossible standards set by his father, who literally as well as symbolically stayed in Chile to pursue his promise to sleep with a different woman every day. This novel clearly exposes the collusion between machismo and power, but fails to re-conceive history as anything but a masculine enterprise that happens between meaningless sexual encounters with purely objectified women. A very different writing of the same novel might have allowed the protagonist himself to reject the entire iceberg exhibition as one more bizarre embodiment of the desire to possess and manipulate the earth in the way that desiring to possess and manipulate women only ends in frustration and failure. That is not the project of the novel, but it does pose the question of what kinds of narratives about politics and history make their way to mainstream publishers and please the “power groups” that Vidal evokes in his introduction.

By way of conclusion, I will confess my own “public persona construction” in writing this response to a former professor (I am a graduate of the University of Minnesota) about a writer I much admire and from whom I have gained tremendous insight into the Chilean history I did not live. Both are luminaries in my field, and I cannot avoid a desire to appeal to both representatives of “power groups” that go without saying, while at the same time forging my own critical distance from each. I am not convinced by Vidal’s insistence that all intellectuals embrace the human rights movement; as Alan Badiou has pointed out, it, too, can succumb to the worst of our nature and be utilized to justify aggressive military action in the name of fighting a nameless evil. At the same time, by achieving bestseller status, Ariel Dorfman exposes himself to a skepticism about what is too easy in his narrative, too appealing to the reader who is not looking to have his or her own complicity with history challenged and instead is looking for a cathartic experience with a hopeful ending. Dorfman’s work is too vast and constantly evolving to be easily dismissed, and his contributions to our collective understanding of the many histories he has lived are invaluable. But the critical debate is ever engaging.

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