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On Hernan Vidal

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The great Chilean critic Hernán Vidal died this August 15 in Minneapolis, where he spent the better part of his career.

In life, Hernán was not an easy person to get close to. We had frequent and sometimes fraught differences, but he was always a great supporter of my work, and I always found inspiration in his. In later life, we developed something like a friendship, albeit at long distance.

Every now and then he would call me on the phone, for no apparent reason, usually Sunday afternoon. “Hello John, Hernán here,” he would say in English—those of you who knew him will recall the sound of his voice: He pronounced John the way many Latin Americans spell it, Jhon. And then we would talk about nothing and everything, but usually about our favorite topic: critical theory and politics. We threw out to each other many plans and projects. None of which ever amounted to much. This summer I noticed he was showing a special preoccupation with my health problems, which are many and varied but not all that serious. “Take care of yourself, John.” Those were his words to me as he hung up one last time. After I got the news of his death, I realized he must have known then that

he was dying, that this would be his last call. He never said a word about his own problems. He was very stoic in that way. After a life-threatening bout with cancer some ten years ago, Buddhism became an important element in his life. I don't know if he was still a believer at the end, but it must have helped him through some hard moments.

There was something of the wounded child about Hernán. Maybe that's what he was, in a way, a child wounded by the tragic modern history of his own country, Chile, which was always at the center of his thoughts, even though he lived thousands of miles away. He was an incessant, restless, one might say, almost driven writer, producing something close to thirty books and collections in his lifetime.

For me, the really eye opening book was his *Literatura hispanoamericana e ideología liberal*, which I had the chance to review for the *Revista Iberoamericana* in the early 1980s and which changed the way I did criticism. It was a short, panoramic view of Latin American narrative from the early 19th century through the boom, with a strong attention to the intersection of the economic (dependency theory in particular), the psychic and the ideological-political. That combination would mark his work throughout. I had a chance to sit in on his course on Latin American Colonial at Minnesota in the 1980s, the lecture notes for which were published—almost in mimeographed form—as *Sociohistoria de la literatura colonial hispanoamericana*. A book that has not gotten much attention, but that anticipates a good deal of what was to come in the 1990s under the rubric of postcolonial criticism. The collection of essays he edited with René Jara, *Testimonio y Literatura* (1986), was the first important critical anthology in the testimonio discussion which was to occupy the field for the next two decades, more or less. There was a huge, pioneer volume edited by Hernán on Latin American feminist criticism. He was one of the first to understand the crisis of the “ciudad letrada” and to move in his own work towards the emerging paradigm of cultural studies—see, for example, his 1988 book *Poética de la población marginal*. That shift towards cultural studies (and the down turn in the fortunes of the Latin American left in the 1980s and 90s), led him to devote much attention in his later work to issues of human rights. His *Poética de la*

tortura política, a late work overlooked and now shamefully out of print, is a deeply moving and insightful study. Hernán was fascinated by the dynamics of armed struggle and military repression, a theme he returned to again and again.

Despite the demands of his own work, Hernán was a deeply *enabling* presence in the field. Here his work in putting together and nurturing, along with Anthony Zahareas and other colleagues at the University of Minnesota, the Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literature in the 1980s was crucial. Many of us—I include myself—owe our careers to that effort. It was a time of a “cambio de la noción de la literatura,” as the Colombian critic Carlos Rincón put it, and all sorts of new things were happening that, as I have noted, Hernán's own work embraced or anticipated strategically: cultural studies, testimonio, second wave feminist criticism, poststructuralism, Rama's *La ciudad letrada*, the emerging impact of postcolonial criticism on the Latin American field, dependency theory, new forms of Marxism, resistance literature, postmodernism (there was a famous debate between Hernán and Nelly Richard on this point in the 1990s, part of which is reproduced in a collection I co-edited at the time, *The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America*). The Institute and its journal, *Ideologies and Literature* (one of the richest journals in Hispanic and Latin American criticism at the time, and still well worth returning to), were at the center of all this. The other main pole of the “cambio” was the Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos “Romulo Gallegos” in Caracas, centered somehow on the figure of Angel Rama, who was in exile in Caracas then. But the Institute was a little more avant-garde, more anticipatory of what was on the horizon, than the “Rómulo,” as we came to call it, and Rama's project. Many of us passed through both places.

Hernán was always frank about his differences with other positions—he had a well-deserved reputation for gruffness—but he was above all a deeply generous and caring person. He changed the way my generation, a “60s” generation emerging into the US and Latin American academy in the 1970s and early 80s, did literary and cultural criticism. He made it possible for us to find a place to publish and discuss our work

collectively. He helped us get jobs. I don't think he has gotten enough credit for that. He thought of his work as an act of solidarity and bearing witness to the times we live in. I owe him a lot, but above all I hope I have been true in my own work to that aspect of his example.

Note: Mabel Morana and Gustavo Remedi have provided a detailed summary of Hernan Vidal's career at <http://spanport.umn.edu/news/allNews.php?entry=426306>.