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Learning to Cherish the Dumb Question

By George D. Greenia | July 11, 2016

I was far enough into my doctoral program in Spanish at the University of Michigan to start to feel (I thought) justifiably smug, especially in courses that mixed graduate students with undergraduate majors. Our control of the target language was better, and we knew that our professors were mostly teaching newbies. We listened indulgently as they let themselves slip into English when the undergraduates were glazing over. Even when professors spoke in Spanish, we could tell when they were switching to “cognatese,” scrambling for legitimate Spanish words that had a recognizable relative in English, the uncommon *retornar* (return) being served up instead of the far more common and natural *volver*.

One day, Professor Monroe Hafter was unpacking for us the glories of the 19th-century Spanish novel like the, well, endless *Fortunata y Jacinta*, a masterpiece that runs a daunting 1,038 pages. An undergraduate woman in heavy makeup and costume jewelry that weighed as much as the book eventually uttered a dramatic sigh and asked, “Why is this book so long?”

The grad students began shooting each other glances of disrespectful amusement, but not Professor Hafter. He rested his own copy on the table and started to reflect on the aesthetic of the long narrative and why it bloomed in highly literate Madrid society despite the popularity of short forms like the ballad, the folktale, and the street drama. Soon enough, we downcast grad students were filling our notebooks with the best content of the semester in any of classes we were taking.

Years later, I had a chance to thank Professor Hafter for his humbling show of professionalism. Impressively, he had no recollection of the event. I still have my copy of *Fortunata y Jacinta* and in his honor, I'll finish it.

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