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Literary Shifts
The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation

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Abstract: This essay examines the translation history of José Donoso's *The Obscene Bird of Night* and its impact on the novel's reception in the English-speaking world. Spanning four decades, the translation saga involves significant omissions and alterations by Hardie St. Martin and Leonard Mades, which compromised the text's structural and thematic integrity. The essay juxtaposes the flawed original translation with Megan McDowell's recent corrective effort, highlighting her success in restoring critical omissions without producing a full retranslation. Using Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic theory, the analysis positions Donoso's masterpiece as a text that defies hierarchical structures, embracing multiplicity, connection, and asignification. It further argues that translation, as an extension of the rhizome, should preserve these qualities. Ultimately, this essay calls for a renewed appreciation of *The Obscene Bird of Night* as a polyphonic and meticulously constructed work of art, and it reflects on the broader implications of translation practices for literary masterpieces.

Keywords: José Donoso; *The Obscene Bird of Night*; Rhizomatic theory; Literary translation; Editorial censorship; Translation violence

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1. The poisoning of a beautiful book

"Naturally, a manuscript." This is the title of the first section of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980/1994), a thriller about the death of three monks killed by a poisonous book. José Donoso's masterpiece, *The Obscene Bird of Night*, is not poisonous, at least not in a literal sense. Still, its translation process into English does resemble a thriller spanning forty-five years, four interpreters, two publishers, and several editors. A translation process that started with a manuscript, naturally, but one that suffered many alterations. Words, phrases, paragraphs, and entire sections have been severed, resulting in an English version many pages shorter than the Spanish counterpart.

In a laudable effort, New Directions has recently righted some of these past wrongs. Megan McDowell, an American translator with deep insights into Chilean culture, has updated the original translation carried out by Hardie St. Martin and Leonard Mades, reintegrating the excised segments and revising inaccuracies while refreshing elements of the original text that had become outdated. It is essential, though, to clarify that McDowell's contribution does not constitute a new translation of *The Obscene Bird of Night*. Instead, her task was defined by the publishers, who sought a correction and modernization of the original translation, as a revision rather than a complete retranslation. This fact in no way undermines the significance of her work, which stands as both substantial and remarkable within the constraints of this assignment. However, this clarification is crucial not only to correctly state McDowell's task but also to frame the nature of the reflections contained in this essay.

The aforementioned translation saga and the comparison between the three texts at hand—the original in Spanish, the first English translation, and the new corrected version—raise myriad questions that intersect literary and translation theories, editorial discretion, ethics, and marketing strategies. We might wonder: How do alterations during translation impact the original work? What motives drive these changes? Are these motives justifiable? And if so, is it ethical to present an incomplete translation

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as a whole? What defines a complete translation? Or is every translation, by its nature, an incomplete representation? Many such questions have been posed and explored to the extent possible by eminent scholars such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Walter Benjamin, Roman Jakobson, Jorge Luis Borges, and Antoine Berman. Our goal is not to exhaustively analyze these debated topics but to invoke the wisdom of these figures as a reminder of all the possible associations and connections that can be activated while we concentrate our thinking on the specific case of the translation of *The Obscene Bird of Night*. Our endeavor here is not to retrace their steps. Instead, we aim to harness their scholarly wisdom as a backdrop for the application of other theoretical frameworks, ones that resonate with the structural and thematic intricacies of Donoso's book.

Specifically, we aim to explore the following questions: Have the alterations during translation poisoned Donoso's masterpiece? If the answer is affirmative, what are the effects of such poisoning? To what extent have the corrections made by Megan McDowell de-poisoned it? Finally, what further interventions may restore fidelity to the original text?

2. Roots and Cutting

Like other texts from the period, *The Obscene Bird of Night* resists the ordered and hierarchical structures commonly applied to the interpretation of texts. Basic questions of literary analysis such as *Who speaks?* or *To whom does the speaker speak?* are difficult to answer. Merely attempting to do so, we find ourselves needing to reformulate these questions on an even more basic level. *How many are speaking? To how many do they speak?* or simply *Does someone or something speak?* The same occurs with all the elementary questions we might pose about this text. *Who*, *to whom*, *what*, *when*, *how*, *where*, and *why* are questions that imply, in varying degrees, a binomial position typical of classical logic. This can't be that, one is not the other, here is not there, now is not at another time.

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The Obscene Bird of Night functions differently. Everything can be this and that at various moments of the narrative and at the same time as well. As in a dreamlike construction, signifiers migrate and meanings merge. If we follow this line of thought, we must find a different logic to guide our analysis of this text and, consequently, our exploration or evaluation of the strategies applied to its translation. Thus, we decided to apply Deleuze and Guattari's (from now on D&G) idea of the *rhizome* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2007)[1] and the logic derived from its structure, which stands in opposition to the tree-like structure of classical thinking. Given the temporal constraints of this exposition, we will not explore the depths of D&G's thinking or the extensive implications of their work. Instead, we will briefly highlight some key connections between the rhizome, *The Obscene Bird of Night*, and the implications to the analysis of its translations. In the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, D&G cite four principles as characteristics of the rhizome: *principles of connection and heterogeneity*, *principle of multiplicity*, *principle of asignification*, and *principle of cartography and de-calcomania*[2]. Applying these principles to *The Obscene Bird of Night*, we can state that:

a) Any point in the novel's territory can be connected to any other. Myth, faith, prostitution, decay, rebirth are all points of entry to the cosmos of the novel. Furthermore, there are aesthetic connections between different parts of the novel, some of which have been severed due to deletions and other changes. For example, the section related to the advent of Communism in Chile ends with poetic evocations similar to the closing of the novel, suggesting a rhizomatic looping of themes and imagery.

[1] All terms specifically associated with Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical framework (such as *rhizome*, *asignifying rupture*, *multiplicity*, *cartography*, etc.) are used in accordance with their definitions as provided in this work.

[2] I have chosen to use *de-calcomania* as a neologism, rather than retaining the standard *decalcomania*, to highlight the conceptual operation at stake. This term, drawn from the French *décalcomanie*, refers to a process of partial, displaced transfer—never total—between surfaces or systems. The addition of the hyphen emphasizes the active gesture of avoiding the trace (calquer, in its archaic French form), embedded in the original term and used by Deleuze and Guattari in their explanation of this principle. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari present the principle of cartography and de-calcomania as a double principle (5 and 6). This pair does not refer to mapping and tracing, but to mapping and avoiding the trace: cartography opens connections and possibilities, while de-calcomania prevents those connections from solidifying into fixed reproductions, allowing for displacements and deformations. In this sense, translation can be understood as cartography and de-calcomania: a process of transfer that, far from merely replicating preexisting models, makes room for the displacements and deformations imposed by the shift between languages. This neologism, then, not only names the conceptual operation at play but also enacts it, displacing the French term through the very process it describes.

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b) The multiplicity of characters and their mutations as well as the settings are "effectively treated as substantive and they cease to have any relation to the One as subject or object, natural or spiritual reality, image and world" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2007, p. 8). The principle of multiplicity applies to the shifting identities in the novel, such as Humberto Peñaloza being Don Jerónimo, Mudito, and even a crone at different points in the story.

c) Asignification, a process that moves beyond traditional meaning-making structures, is evident almost in every aspect of *The Obscene Bird of Night* and presents a serious challenge to any translator. At times, the shifting identities mentioned above are a clear example of asignification. However, other less obvious aspects of the text gain significance through their meta-literary nature. In certain passages the narrative becomes essayistic. Following a process of asignification, new shoots appear along the narration, pointing in various directions. Donoso's ideas about beauty, the process of writing, the conceptions of time, seamlessly shoot out of the anecdote.

d) As we already stated, there is no existing cartography that can be superimposed to this book because it is "not amenable to any structural or generative model" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2007, p. 12). For example, Oedipal structures, such as the father-son relationship, do not suffice to explain the relationship between Mudito and Don Jerónimo. Similarly, all-encompassing structures like messianic or heroic narratives do not apply to this story. In essence, Donoso's masterpiece deconstructs traditional structures, allowing its narrative to grow like a rhizome—unpredictable, unbounded, and resistant to conventional frameworks.

Although using these criteria to explore the translation of Donoso's book may be deemed unfair, let's remember that in the monumentality of the task resides the need for corrections and retranslations. Often, first translations are just a first step. In our conception of the text as a rhizome, translations can be considered as new shoots of the rhizome that serve as nodes for the text's continuous development, or, in the Peircean concept as interpreted by Umberto Eco, as unlimited semiosis (Eco, 1984/1986). In this sense, St. Martin and Mades kicked off a process that McDowell

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brilliantly carried forward to the extent of the task assigned to her, namely a correction and aggiornamento of the first translation, which still suffers from various ailments.

Besides the outdated language, the large and small cuts mentioned in the introduction—which we will describe in some detail later—and small word errors with no significant impact on the comprehension or readability of the translated text, the first translation presents two structural problems:

a) Serious difficulties to reproduce the vernacular of certain characters.

b) Alterations of the rhythm of the narration.

Translation theory has widely addressed the challenges of transposing vernacular between languages. Many translators have succeeded, while others have failed. Antoine Berman's assertion that "a vernacular clings tightly to its soil and completely resists any direct translating into another vernacular" (Berman, 1985/2012) fittingly applies to *The Obscene Bird of Night*. Neither St. Martin and Mades nor McDowell tried this approach, despite their significant differences in translation strategy. The first translators' approach consisted in translating some of the vernacular phrases into standard English and then alter the spelling to signal the colloquial aspects of the utterance. Had this solution been applied consistently throughout the text, the result might have been somewhat successful. However, the haphazard nature of its application turns the polyphony of the original text into cacophony. One simple example suffices to illustrate this problem. In one page the phrase "*¡Qué bajís Gina!*" (Donoso, 1970/2018, p. 27) is translated as "He says for you to come down, Gina" (Donoso, 1970/1979 p. 25), while "*¿Qué querís?*" (Donoso, 1970/2018, p. 25) was translated as "¿What do you want? (Donoso, 1970/1979 p. 9), and later on is translated as "Whadya want?" (Donoso, 1970/1979, p. 64). Confronted with these inconsistencies, McDowell made the only decision available to her within her purview: to render most of the colloquialisms into standard language, the result being a homogenized prose that lacks the texturization of the original.

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Similarly, the rhythm of the original text suffered so many alterations that fixing them would require a full retranslation and a separate analysis. St. Martin and Mades distorted Donoso's syntax by changing punctuation marks, frequently replacing periods and commas with ellipsis punctuation. Let's compare the following segments:

Donoso's Original	St. Martin and Mades' Translation
Quién quiere donar sangre para don Humberto, yo, yo, yo, yo, todos quieren donar su sangre monstruosa como si desearan deshacerse de ella, se han vestido de blanco para disimular que los sorprendí en una orgía, desnudos pero vestidos de blanco, disfrazados de enfermeros con delantales y con mascarillas que no ocultan sus monstruosidades, tú eres Melisa, te reconozco por las gafas negras, tú Basilio, cómo confundirte, y tú Emperatriz y tú Azula y tú Mateo y hasta la telefonista de orejas de alas de murciélago ha abandonado el conmutador para vestirse también de blanco y presenciar lo que haya que presenciar, miembros de una orden misteriosa, monjes de dominós blancos para un baile de fantasía en que la careta no es de rigor porque cada cual tiene la propia, y los monstruos ataviados con dominós blancos y caretas fantásticas manejan termómetros, sondas, inyecciones, lavativas y rayos equis, un frasco de suero va vaciándose lentamente dentro de mí desde lo alto. (Donoso, 1970/2018, p. 237-238)	Who wants to donate blood for Don Humberto … I, I, I, I … they all want to give me their monstrous blood as if they were anxious to get rid of it … they've dressed up in white to cover up the fact that I surprised them in an orgy, naked under their white hospital clothes, disguised as nurses with aprons and masks that can't hide their monstrosities … you're Melisa, I recognize you because of your dark glasses … you, Basilio, how could I mistake you … and you, Emperatriz … and you, Azula … and you, Mateo … and even the telephone operator with ears like bat wings has deserted her switchboard to dress in white too. (Donoso, 1970/1979, p. 215) [The rest of this sentence has been excised]

OBSERVATORIO de la lengua española y las culturas hispánicas en los Estados Unidos
Instituto Cervantes at FAS - Harvard University

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We recognize that the choice between commas and ellipsis is debatable, and it points to singular translation strategies of equal validity. Commas convey speed, ellipsis signal depth. At a superficial level we argue that, in this specific scene, the character, confronted with a dubious surgical procedure, is not in a position of expressing deep thinking or hesitation. However, we also believe that this choice must be analyzed in terms of its effects within the context of the original text in its entirety.

Donoso structures the chapters of *The Obscene Bird of Night* like the flight of a plane: a slow take-off, fast cruising (turbulent at times), and a gentle descent. Syntactically, this structure is represented by short and declarative opening sentences and paragraphs, long (extremely long) sections that run with abundant coordinating and subordinating phrases in the middle section of the chapter, and slow, sometimes poetic endings, which are not always rendered in the first translation.

Due to the abundant cuts, changes in punctuation, flattening of the vernacular, and an inconsistent use of poetic spin, the tempo of the narration appears divorced from the dramatism of the content. At times, the emotional ups and downs of the story lose their structural anchor, transforming the intense action of the original into hectic activity in the first translation. McDowell aptly reins in the dissonant notes. The new version provides the English reader with an easier read, but the thrill of the original is gone. While McDowell's revisions provide a harmonious reading experience, they might sacrifice the raw vitality of Donoso's rhizomatic text.

3. Translation Violence

The reconstruction of an act of violence is never perfect; this one won't be either. The cuts St. Martin and Mades made to *The Obscene Bird of Night* were numerous and varied, relentless at times and haphazard at others. Understanding their motives and intentions within the context of possible external constraints would be nearly impossible and likely futile. Therefore, this section will focus on some deletions and

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their potential effects on the book's overall reception. We will concentrate on three main themes, identified here as: The Bearded Men, Inés' Infertility, and Bourgeois Enchantment.

3.1. The Bearded Men

Early in chapter 5, St. Martin and Mades cut about sixty lines Donoso dedicated to the emergence of Communism in Chile. In this section, Iris, a young character, runs around the convent with a paper hat made of newspaper pages showcasing a picture of a bearded man in the front. This is how Donoso starts the excised section:

> That was the signal that started the terror: the bearded leader chased me through the corridors at night, with his rifle-armed millions, foul-smelling and vengeful, with his threat of cruelty and blood. What had I done to make him threaten me? Who was I? Nothing, no one, I'm nothing and no one.[3] (Donoso, 1970/2024, p. 58-59)

The narration continues with a series of reflections about the paranoid image of being stalked by bearded men. The first translators also deleted all further references to beards and bearded men that appear sporadically in the rest of the book. In some cases, entire references were cut. In others, as in the following example, the reference was simply truncated.

> Iris drink this hot linden tea with lemon, it'll do you good, and don't cry anymore what's wrong, don't turn toward the wall, don't curl up against those men with beards and rifles who are so ugly… what was Mudito thinking when he put those awful devils right there, they'll scare the child, look this way instead, don't cry, that's right, nice and quiet, it's ok, go back to sleep.[4] (Donoso, 1970/2024, p. 97)

Only the first sentence of this fragment was translated originally, and the translators incorrectly translated *linden* by *lime* even though a lime tea with lemon does not make much sense. The confusion may be due to the common name for the linden tree used

[3] Fue la señal que inició el terror: el líder barbudo me perseguía con sus esbirros armados de carabinas, malolientes, vengativos, por los corredores, en la noche, con su amenaza de crueldad de sangre. ¿Qué había hecho yo? Nada, nadie, no soy nada ni nadie. (Donoso, 1970/2018, p. 74)

[4] Toma, Iris, este tilo con limón calentito te va a hacer bien y no llores más, qué te pasa, no te des vuelta contra la pared, no te arrincones contra esos hombres con barba y carabina que son tan feos… la idea del Mudito de poner justo ahí al lado de la cama de la Iris a esos abocastros, esta chiquilla se va a asustar, mira para este otro lado, no llores, así calladita, si no pasó nada, duérmete otra vez. (Donoso, 1970/2018, p. 112)

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in England: lime tree. Regardless, the error points to the translators' lack of sufficient understanding of Chilean daily life.

Although most of the references to the bearded men do not associate them to political figures, later in the novel, Donoso makes one of the characters talk as if she was reading newspaper headlines of the time.

> She says Americans Bomb Vicinity of Hanoi, Onassis Speaks, Panagra the Modern Man's Airline, Allende for President, Miniskirts Barred by Archdiocese Cathedral, Fidel Castro Declares Intellectuals Must Take Part in Sugar Harvest This Year, Fi-del Cas-tro, Castro, now, Iris, you have to learn the alphabet correctly: C-A-S-T-R-O, tell me where the A in Castro is in this word, Nikita right, that's the A, you see how you're not stupid and it's not hard, but why do you want to know why they kicked out the man called Nikita if you can't even read well yet.[5] (Donoso, 1970/2024 p.102)

Finally, we have a clear idea of the reason for all these bearded men. Here, Donoso gives us a time reference and a strong indication of the issues that were capturing the attention of Chilean society. Literary critics have interpreted the entire novel as an allegory of the profound changes affecting Chilean society in the sixties. Undoubtedly, it is one the main readings that this thickly layered book can produce. Severing the allusions to the advent of Communism may not fully impede this interpretation, but it greatly devalues the work.

As for the intention behind the cuts, it is legitimate to infer political pressures on those responsible for publishing the book; an inference that makes a lot of sense in the context of the years of the Cold War. The role of the CIA and the Department of State in the development of the translation field has been very well documented. However, the political aim behind this section can hardly be interpreted as promoting a communist agenda. A close inspection of the paragraph in question makes it clear that Donoso is just reproducing a few pieces of news with diverse ideological perspectives. If any type

[5] Dice los americanos bombardean las cercanías de Hanoi, Onassis declara, Panagra la línea aérea del hombre moderno, Allende al poder, minifaldas expulsadas de la catedral metropolitana, intelectuales deben tomar parte en la zafra este año declara Fidel Castro, Fi-del, Cas-tro, Castro, aprende bien las letras pues, Iris: C-A-S-T-RO, la a de Castro díme [*sic*] dónde está aquí en esta otra palabra: Nikita, claro, ésa es la a, ves que no eres tonta y no cuesta nada, pero para qué quieres saber por qué echaron a ése que se llamaba Nikita si ni siquiera sabes leer bien todavía. (Donoso, 1970/2018, p. 120)

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of censorship was imposed upon the text, its logic remains obscure, such as it happens with any other type of totalitarian control.

In addition to rendering the text in an incomplete manner, the deletions summarized in this section also affect what Antoine Berman (1985/2012) denominates the "underlying networks of signification" of the book, which align with the rhizome's first principle: the connections between different parts of the text's territory. By severing these networks, the translators compromise the novel's thematic and symbolic cohesion. In the case of the severing of the bearded men, its ending directly connects with the ending of the novel: "I found the paper cap on the dirt floor of the courtyard, and I burned it. The smell of singed beard soon dissipated in the breeze" (Donoso, 1970/2024, p. 60).

We can only speculate that the first two translators cut these two sentences for completion's sake. Not even the slightest sign of the bearded men was left; they disappeared and with them the link to the end of the novel, which states that everything that remains of the saga is burned, and the ashes are dispersed by the wind.

3.2. Inés de Azcoitía's Infertility

Another deletion that disrupts the different layers of the rhizomatic connections in the text refers to the infertility of Inés de Azcoitía. Her infertility is a key element of the story both at the narrative and symbolic levels. Donoso unveils this fact in two stages. In chapter three, Donoso tells us that Don Jerónimo de Azcoitía and his wife, Inés de Azcoitía, had no children, and in chapter five he explicitly states that Inés was infertile. St. Martin and Mades deleted these two entries. The first one reads:

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> Inés and Jerónimo have no children. Their surname will disappear with them, and they know it. Their fortune will be divided among relatives who don't respect them, institutions that don't interest them, heirs, charities.[6] (Donoso, 1970/2024, p. 37-38)

The second expands on their childlessness, describing Don Jerónimo's feelings and the reason behind it. Referring to a child that Don Jerónimo had supposedly engendered in another character of the story, Donoso says:

> The last Azcoitía, yearned for, waited for, and sought for in Inés womb, which refused to produce it.[7] (Donoso, 1970/2024, p. 76)

In the first of the two translations, "which refused to produce it" was deleted. Narratively, these deletions are problematic in more ways than one, and they are difficult to fully explain without diving into the intricacies of the story. Suffice it to say that Inés de Azcoitía suffered of several obsessions which led her to Europe, where she had her uterus removed. She later conceives a deformed child through witchcraft, triggering Don Jerónimo's major obsession: the construction of an estate to isolate his deformed child, preventing him from confronting his abnormalities against traditional ideas about beauty and ugliness. Without access to this information, Don Jerónimo's obsessive and surreal construction of the estate and Inés' seemingly erratic actions lose their grounding in the narrative, rendering their behavior difficult to interpret.

Symbolically, Inés' infertility points to another of the changes in Chilean society referenced in the previous section, namely the start of the weakening of aristocratic power that had dominated Chile for centuries. This allusion operates on two interconnected levels. On one level, Donoso portrays a society shaken by the collapse of traditional structures that had ruled for centuries. On a deeper level, Inés' infertility symbolizes the sterility of these institutions, unable to adapt or sustain their influence in a modernizing world. Connecting these passages to other sections of the novel, we can infer Donoso's critique of traditional institutions. As the next section will show,

[6] Inés y Jerónimo no han tenido hijo. El apellido desaparecería después de ellos. Eso lo saben. La fortuna se repartiría entre parientes que no los estiman, instituciones que no les interesan, legados, caridades. (Donoso, 1970/2018, p. 53)

[7] El último Azcoitía añorado y esperado y buscado en el vientre de Inés que se negó a producirlo. (Donoso, 1970/2018, p. 92)

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Donoso's critique of the old aristocracy does not equate to a blind acceptance of the materialistic bourgeoisie that replaces it.

While the rhizomatic structure of the text ensures its sturdiness, the removal of references to Inés' infertility likely alters both narrative comprehension and symbolic resonance. In the context of the novel's rhizomatic structure, excessive pruning severs the intricate connections that sustain its meaning, ultimately leading to narrative and symbolic barrenness.

The motivation behind these deletions remains elusive. It could be as simple as the intention to shorten the overall length of the book, or as complex as the interference of some moralistic speculations. In this instance, we prefer not to advance any unsubstantiated interpretation.

3.3. Bourgeois Enchantment

Aspirational images of bourgeois society were omitted from the first English translation. These images included references to objects, brands, actors, designers, photographers, and places that signify a life of privilege, affluence, and leisure.

Examples include chinchilla coats, crocodile purses, tailleurs, and mentions to Audrey Hepburn, Vogue magazine, Marbella, and vernissages. English and French expressions used by the upper class to signal familiarity with an inaccessible world also disappeared.

Donoso's depiction of bourgeois society goes beyond mere allusion. He places these terms in the mouth of Emperatriz, Don Jerónimo's dwarf cousin, who runs the estate built to isolate his deformed child. Emperatriz plays the role of the operations manager who oversees a very large number of employees selected primarily for their own deformities. To preserve his son's self-esteem, Don Jerónimo designs a habitat absent of objects and people that conform to traditional standards of beauty. The place is

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ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

decorated with classical statues and paintings modified to depict ugliness instead of beauty, and the workforce is recruited from beggars, circuses, and freak shows

Her dwarf cousin, who despite having the Azcoitía's blood running in her veins had been a family outsider, becomes the perfect person to manage the place. Donoso turns Emperatriz into the poster child for the depiction of the emerging upper class of Chile and populates her lexicon with an abundance of foreign terms and symbols normally associated with the jet set. Donoso uses this lexicon to describe de vernacular that characterizes the bourgeoisie's nouveau riche mentality. In doing so, the author signals the double performative function of this construction of the language: to establish the speaker's belonging to the group that "is in the know," and to protect them from the insecurity rooted in their own awareness that such belonging is not legitimized by blood lineage.

Towards the end of the novel, Donoso describes a scene that demonstrates this last point. Emperatriz and Dr. Azula, her one-eyed husband, are having a cup of coffee in an empty bar discussing their plans to flee the country. Passersby, drawn by the sight of the deformed couple, start entering the bar until all tables are filled and many people stand around the tables observing the couple. Realizing that they have become a spectacle, Emperatriz and Dr. Azula decide to leave, and the following dialogue ensues:

> "Let's go."
> "Yes, let's go."
> "Pay the check, Cris …"
> "Waiter!"
> The waiter comes over.
> "How much do I owe?"
> "The boss says to tell you there's no charge, and to thank you …"
> Emperatriz gets to her feet, wrapping herself in her Emba Mutation Mink. In Europe, chinchillas. Yes sir, they say at Evas, in Barcelona, Don Carlos sells violet chinchillas. Yes, sir, I'll have a violet chinchilla coat. It can't be all that expensive for someone my size.
> "But why?"
> "Well, you've attracted so much attention that it got around that you were being lovey-dovey in here and people started coming in from the street to see you … take a look at the tables, all filled up and it's bringing in a lot of business at an hour when there's not a soul in all the other cafés around here. It's on the house."[7] (Donoso, 1970/2024, p. 408)

Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

Emperatriz's fantasy of changing her fur mink coat for chinchilla (a status symbol of extreme wealth and exclusivity) does not appear in the first translation.

Donoso's text plays a language game of double juxtaposition. First, by placing bourgeois aspirations in the words of Emperatriz, a marginalized character, and second, by contrasting their fantasies with the harsh reality of public scrutiny, he creates a rich tapestry of interrelated cultural phenomena, all removed by the first translators and publishers.

These cuts eliminate intertextuality. Donoso's interest in bourgeois semiotics spans his oeuvre, including *Tres novelitas burguesas*, published only a few years after *The Obscene Bird of Night* and translated as *Sacred Families: Three Novellas*, which explores Spanish bourgeoisie dynamics in the seventies.

However, not only intertextuality is eliminated by all these reductions. *The Obscene Bird of Night* is a polyphonic novel that combines a variety of vernaculars to recreate the speech of Chilean society at the time of the novel. As we mentioned in the previous chapter, St. Martin and Mades had translated the vernacular of the old women living in the convent in an inconsistent manner. Here we are pointing to the complete elimination of another vernacular. The polyphony was gone, the text had been flattened and English readers have been deprived of Donoso's mastery.

In addition to the impoverishment of the novel's voices, the first translation also omitted an elaborate allegory to the dreams and aspirations of the middle class.

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[8] —¡Mozo!
El mozo se acerca:
—¿Cuánto debo?
—El patrón manda a decir que nada, gracias…
Emperatriz se pone en pie, arrebujándose en su Emba Mutation Mink. En Europa, chinchillas. Sí, señor, dicen que en Evas, en Barcelona, don Carlos vende chinchillas violeta. Sí, señor, tendré un abrigo de chinchillas violeta. Para alguien de mi estatura no puede resultar demasiado caro.
—¿Pero, por qué?
—Bueno, es que ustedes han llamado tanto la atención que se fue corriendo la voz de que estaban pololeando aquí y empezó a entrar gente de la calle para verlos… miren cómo están las mesas, todas llenas y mucho consumo a esta hora cuando en los demás cafés de por aquí penan las ánimas. Es cortesía de la casa. (Donoso, 1970/2018, p. 413)

Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

This allegory centers on a music box in the shape of a Swiss chalet playing Liszt's "Carnival of Venice," a composition that transcended the audience boundaries of classical music to appeal to all societal strata. Like the figure of Emperatriz, this combination of chalet and music embodies a distorted form of bourgeois enchantment—sentimental excess wrapped in aesthetic kitsch. Furthermore, the music box in question is found in the residence for the poor old women and is completely dilapidated. El Mudito, the main character of the story, works hard at restoring the chalet to give it as a gift to one of the orphan girls.

The convent serves as a refuge for the maids that, due to their old age, are not of service anymore for the aristocratic families of the city, but it also provides space to discard their old belongings. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the music box might have once been a souvenir brought back from one of their frequent European trips. In the hands of El Mudito, the Swiss chalet acquires a different signification. It points to the tendency of the middle to adopt behaviors, customs and objects that were once signals of high status but have lost their symbolic power.[9] The dilapidated music box, once a symbol of high status, now functions as a poignant marker of the erosion of meaning attached to bourgeois objects, paralleling the transience of social aspirations.

Another case of intratextuality disappeared together with all these deletions. Emperatriz's aspirational vocabulary and the scene of the music box are linked by the Swiss chalet. In a different section, Donoso tells us that Emperatriz used to give themed parties at the residence for Don Azcoitía's son, and once the theme was "Swiss Chalet" and "Emperatriz's place, her boudoir and salons, had been decorated with simulated snow and edelweiss on the windows" (Donoso, 1970/2024, p. 426).

The Obscene Bird of Night contains a multiplicity of subplots or branching stories. Given the novel's rhizomatic nature, we call them narrative shoots—a deliberate distinction, not a superficial twist. Frequently, in the application of classic logic to the

[9] For a deeper treatment of this phenomenon see *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* by Pierre Bordieu (1985/2012).

Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

analysis of a text, subplots or branching stories are considered digressive, secondary stories that can distract us from the linear plot. Therefore, subplots are expendable. Conversely, in rhizomatic logic, a narrative shoot implies the presence of a node in the root system of the story. In a literary text, nodes have three critical functions. They operate as:

- Points of Intersection:
  Nodes can represent moments where different narrative strands (or subplots) intersect, influencing or transforming the main story.

- Origins of Growth:
  Nodes symbolize places where ideas, themes, or characters "branch out" or develop, contributing to the richness and complexity of the story.

- Resilience and Renewal:
  Just as plants can regenerate from nodes, stories or characters might find renewal at these crucial points.

A translator guided by classical logic who has been tasked to shorten the original text (a reprehensible but not exceptional practice) may very well consider the emergence of Communism in Chile, Inés' infertility, and bourgeois enchantment as digressive subplots that can be removed without damaging the integrity of the work. Nothing further from the truth in the case of Donoso's masterpiece. Even less so, when we consider the three instances analyzed here are only a few examples of the many cuts the novel suffered, among them a short essay on the differences between wanting to be a writer and becoming one, descriptions of organ trafficking, reflections on nudity, and more.

Thanks to Megan McDowell's efforts, the full content of Donoso's original has been restored, reestablishing the intra- and intertextual connections essential to the novel. However, the flattening of syntax and vernacular in the first translation has left an indelible mark, altering the rhythm and texture of Donoso's prose.

Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

4. Rhizomatic Logic and the Making of a Masterpiece

The Obscene Bird of Night reads as a deliberate and meticulously constructed work of art. Despite being deeply rooted in the foundational myths of Chile and its societal characteristics in the sixties, it feels universal. For decades, it has sustained various interpretations: sociological, psychological, anthropological, linguistic, semiotic, and philosophical. However, in the English-speaking world, it has retained the image of a complex, sometimes illogical piece of writing—an extravagant effort to depict delirium. Even Philip Swanson, a prominent scholar in Latin American literature, and an admirer of Donoso, notes in his book *José Donoso: The "Boom" and Beyond* that "the many inconsistencies in the plot make it difficult to be certain about what exactly happens on a narrative level" (1988, p. 81). However, he also recognizes that: "It would be unfair to describe *El obsceno pájaro*, as some do, as a novel without a structure, for Donoso does employ a variety of techniques to help the reader to find his way through this textual jungle" (p. 81).

Swanson is right. *The Obscene Bird of Night* does have a structure, but it is not binomial nor built around dualities and oppositions, as Swanson himself states elsewhere in his analysis. This structure does not grow chaotically like a jungle. It may feel chaotic if we impose a hierarchical logic on it, but if we apply the principles of rhizomatic logic—connectivity, multiplicity, asignification, and numerous entryways—chaos becomes disruption.

When *The Obscene Bird of Night* was first published in the US, some critics sensed its greatness. In 1973, Robert Coover, writing for *The New York Times*, made the following prognosis: "I have no idea what fate awaits it, but it certainly deserves to take its place alongside the major works of Asturias and Fuentes, Cortazar, Borges and Rulfo, Vargas Llosa and García Márquez" (Coover, 1973, p. 2).

Unfortunately, Coover's wish did not materialize. *The Obscene Bird* did not find its place alongside *Hopscotch*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or *Conversation in the Cathedral*. Is St. Martin and Mades' translation responsible for this? Answering

Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

affirmatively would be counterfactual. After all, the success or failure of a book is not solely dependent on its translation. Nevertheless, we can assert that Donoso's book deserved a translation without censorship, capricious cuts, and one respectful of the author's use of syntax and idiolects.

Fortunately, New Directions' new edition of the book and Megan McDowell's superb job at correcting the most glaring shortcomings of the first translation without incurring into a complete re-write are a gigantic step forward toward bringing the dark but beautiful singing of the obscene bird to new audiences.

At the most basic level, we hope that the case of this flawed translation encourages translators, editors, publishers, and writers to keep reflecting on the potential consequences of their decisions throughout the publishing process. We also hope this analysis reinforces the idea that literature is not a tree, forest, or jungle—it is a rhizome, ever-expanding and interconnected. Similarly, we propose that a translation is not a separate tree planted miles away from the original; it is another shoot of the same organism.

While this essay focuses on the rhizomatic nature of *The Obscene Bird of Night*, it invites broader reflection on how the principles of rhizomatic logic might help us understand other literary classics. From *Don Quixote* to *Ulysses*, great works often resist hierarchical interpretations, offering multiple entry points and endless connections. By approaching them as rhizomes, we gain new tools to explore their enduring complexity and relevance. We want to close by citing the description of the feelings Cortázar was left with after reading Donoso's masterpiece. We sincerely hope the English reader can now approach the same state of wonder.

> For my part, I've always felt it as a gigantic metaphor—if I may put it that way, I feel as if you had entered the Prado and there, in a stealthy hour with no guards in sight, you had carried out the unspeakable operation of blending the specular labyrinth of *Las Meninas* with the atmosphere of the paintings of the Quinta del Sordo. (Cortázar, 2012, p. 110; my translation)

Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

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Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

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Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

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Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

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Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

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Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

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Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

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Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies

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Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

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Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

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Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

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Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

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Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN

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Literary Shifts. The Obscene Bird Sings Again: Tale of a Tortured Translation
Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 096-04/2025EN
ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR096-04/2025EN