Today the concept of creativity has an unprecedented reach, both within and beyond the artistic sphere. Definitions of the creative have become inextricable from definitions of who we are or who we are becoming. Creativity no longer designates a special capacity detached from everyday routine. For many people it is the key to getting along in the world, even surviving. Creativity reveals itself as an essential human asset, both symbolically and economically, on the levels both of the individual and of the species. Our aim is to assess the advantages and the predicaments of a state in which everything and everyone is creative. We have associated this essay with the novel *The Savage Detectives* (1998; English translation 2007) by the Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño (1953-2003), imagining our own inquiry as an extension of the quest of that book’s protagonists. This allows us to condense our questions into a single formula, the question that Bolaño left unanswered, or encrypted, in his novel.

We begin by suggesting that the contemporary detachment of creativity from any particular expertise, which we characterize as “generic creativity,” raises again the question of the ontology of creativity. For the disorienting aspects of the contemporary situation, whereby creativity loses its anchorage in any particular subject or object, remind us that if creativity has in the past been understood as a skillful or technological manipulation of the given, it has also been understood as an *adding to reality*, generating a *novum* that
could not have been foreseen. It was this underivability of the product that gave poetry and art their rarefied quality.

In order to test the hypothesis that contemporary generic creativity might reveal something valuable about the relation of creativity to being, we consider the place of poetry in modern life, which is the subject of Bolaño’s novel as well as of Julio Cortázar’s Rayuela (1963), one of the key models for Bolaño. Both books recognize a binarism between what we call “romantic” and “classical” conceptions of creativity: on the one hand, an adding to the world, and on the other hand, a recombinination of the already at hand. This traditional way of framing the question would seem to be suspended by the contemporary concept of generic creativity, which resembles an undisciplined version of romantic creativity. Poetry, the anachronistic pursuit of Bolaño’s modern urban protagonists, symbolized in the novel an attempt to understand the nature of creativity in terms other than those offered by the romantic and classical models. The detectives’ path led to a wordless pictogram which appeared to satisfy them, although they never say why. We will try to interpret the pictogram.

**AMBIVALENCE**

The term “creativity” has recently resurfaced in a range of discursive contexts. Creativity provided the theme of the XX German Philosophical Congress in 2005. Psychologists and linguists have succeeded in demonstrating the interdisciplinary applications of the concept. The theme of creativity plays a key role in political theories arguing for the rejection of alienating modes of labor in capitalist society via the autonomization of creative forces and the realization of alternative forms of life. In the early 2000s the term was used to name a socioeconomic category of workers, a “creative class” amounting to about thirty percent of the U.S. workforce and including a wide range of occupations (e.g. science, engineering, education, computer programming, research), with arts, design, and media. Unlike the modern notion of spiritual freedom, which seems to trust in the reality of a domain transcending nature, including human nature, creativity can easily be naturalized. It can be regarded as a capacity allied with the species’s inherent tendency to adjust itself inventively to the environment. Such a dynamic procedure may sustain scientific research as well as artistic practice. Inquiries into the mechanisms of creativity thus offer a way of breaking disciplinary boundaries and of discovering a non-specialized ground shared by epistemology and aesthetics. It is equally noteworthy that creativity underpins the dialogue among cognitive sciences, philosophical phenomenology, and Buddhist meditative psychology, in which the creative interplay of body and mind is described as embodied experience and as a co-origination of things and persons through ungrounded co-dependency.

The renewed interest in creativity suggests a growing awareness that human beings adapt their capacities to invent, make, and perform to a variety of specialized activities. For some time now the creative disciplines per se—ranging from crafts to all the practices that in the eighteenth century were isolated and exalted as the beaux-arts, namely, painting, sculpture, poetry, music, architecture, and gardening—have been less concerned with their own distinctiveness and self-definition. We can register a clear retreat from the rarefied, even elitist, idea of creativity that in the West has sustained claims for the uniqueness and originality of artistic work from Dante to Heidegger. Instead, a view of creativity as a pervasive and limitless force has emerged, one that may bear indifferently on artistic and non-artistic dimensions.

But the concept of creativity may have overcome one form of mistrust—suspicion of elitism—only to be delivered to another. For the new concept of creativity has also become a facile, even cynical, slogan in corporate and entrepreneurial culture. Job advertisements in the back of the weekly magazine The Economist routinely list “creativity” as a desirable quality in an applicant. Creativity sells, as the recent flowering of so-called creative industries attests; industries, namely, that seek to maximize the inventiveness of producers and consumers: cinema, television, communications technology, fashion, video games, advertising.

The current interest in creativity might well be viewed against the back-
ground of broader transformations affecting the realm of labor. The last two decades especially have witnessed an increasing recruitment of the psycho-physical energies of individuals to the cause of capitalism as demanded in its post-Fordist and multinational phase. The result is that today one is expected not so much to develop a specific expertise or follow a vocation, but rather to cultivate and market a creative flexibility. Insofar as work is ever more in-material and ever more relative to geo-cultural contexts, people are led to rely upon their immanent resource of creativity in learning to operate wherever human labor may be needed.

Rather than offering a point of contact among heterogeneous discourses, fueling emancipatory projects, or sustaining faith in the invention of new presents, the renewed fascination with creativity may turn out to be the accomplice of new forms of exploitation. One can see the risk—pointed out recently by a German publication entitled “Critique of Creativity”—that academic and other discursive endorsements of creativity could naively function as a mask for liberal self-legitimation.

In sum, the appeals to the creative across a range of disciplines and subcultures serve different, if conflicting agendas. Just as for some these appeals open new paths of resistance and emancipation, for others they represent a mystification and an abandonment of critical vigilance. There is a tremendous ambivalence in the uses and understandings of the concept of creativity.

This ambivalence is further illustrated if one turns to artistic practice, the arena where creativity has been most intensely cherished and at the same time demystified. When, in 1973, Joseph Beuys founded, with Heinrich Böll, the “Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research,” his intent was to further the democratization and the de-disciplinization of artistic practice. He maintained that anyone is potentially an artist and that creativity is not limited to those who practice the traditional forms of art. When, more recently, the American artist Jeff Koons declared that he is producing works that make viewers feel at ease with themselves, their own history, and their potential, he too was seeking to unleash creativity as well as to democratize and de-disciplinize artistic practice. Koons wished, and wishes, to make works of art that no longer make the public feel ashamed of the banality of their own tastes. While Beuys, faithful to a history of struggle that goes back to the avant-garde of the mid-nineteenth century, rebelled against the status quo, hoping that a recovery of the lost anthropological matrix of art might mark out a third way between communism and capitalism, Koons indicates that he is happy with the way things are. In appealing to the common audience’s preferences, he not only endorses an economy that commercializes almost every aspect of human life, but also overtly presents himself as an ordinary vendor trying to sell his wares.12

The shaman-like Beuys and the seemingly ordinary vendor Koons propose quite dissimilar ethical, political, and economical scenarios. And yet the two artists seem to be advocating exactly the same detachment of the creative from aesthetic norms, expectations, and conventions that, although for opposite reasons, they both understand as hindrances to artistic production and reception. This striking homology of aims between the two artists’s otherwise different stances is telling. It indicates that the disentanglement of the creative from identifiable areas of expertise is a phenomenon without a precise political or ethical connotation. It both breeds and benefits from the ambivalence of the creative.

**Genericity**

The new availability of the creative follows from its acentered quality. Creativity has become an immanent resource of the human species disengaged from one or another particular area of expertise or know-how. It has become generic. All parties today, regardless of their conflicting political agenda or ethical bent, seem to converge on this view. But the term “ambivalence” is also meant to point to the difficulties met as soon as one tries to move beyond the new axiom of a widespread, limitless creativity and instead fathom the ontological function of the creative. The concept of generic creativity has implications for the way we think about the relation of artistic activity and the forces that make up reality.13

Belief in generic creativity is the historical successor to a premodern conception of creativity as the mastery of a skill. But it is also the successor to a more recent—that is, at least since the European Renaissance and certainly since the eighteenth century—conception of creativity as a surplus of inventiveness that has the potential to rarefy poetic or artistic production.

Once creativity is no longer framed within those two powerful conceptions, and is therefore detached from particular competences, attempts to evaluate its manifestations falter. It is difficult to distinguish, for example, between the products of low and high culture. The formal devices once invented by the artistic avant-gardes may be now adapted in a TV commercial

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12 Tomkins remarks that, like Warhol, Koons is a “selling talent” though his talent is “generic”: that of “the all-American youngster who pushes his product.” See Tomkins, “The Turnaround Artist,” 63.

or, vice versa, an artwork shown in an art gallery in New York’s Chelsea may rehash the outlook of advertising. But the becoming generic runs even deeper than this. Genericity conjures up a scenario in which there is no longer something singular to be produced or received, and in which the provenance and the destination of creativity are blurred.14

The becoming generic of the creative has brought about a disorientation touching the subject as well as the object. On the side of the object, there is no way of telling exactly why this creative object (a product of art, fashion, or technology) and not another should elicit my emotional and intellectual responses. On the side of the subject, there is no way of telling exactly why what I do and who I am should ever unfold into creativity.

It could be objected that the foregoing remarks, biased by habituated notions of subject and object, fail to divine that disorientation is actually a good thing. Perhaps the concept of generic creativity is announcing the nirvana of the twenty-first century: a blissful state in which the globalized earth will rest at ease with itself once the gaps between being and nonbeing, the One and the Other, the Self and the Other-Than-Self, are finally dissolved. However, a counter-argument would be that such a nirvana would yield no illumination: indeed it would obscure the perception that, in becoming generic, creativity risks becoming tantamount to a reiteration of the given. If the singularities of the subjects and objects accounting for the emergence of the creative are destined to vanish within all the rest, then it follows that the given situation is impervious to any agencies creatively performing within it. “Nirvana” is a deceptive name for the perpetuation of the status quo.

The question we are asking is: Does generic creativity reveal something about creativity that might become the basis for a new or evolved conception of rarefied production? If so, how would one recognize such creativity? Where would one look for it? The hypothesis of this essay is that the more self-aware mode of generic creativity cannot achieve.

14 Though from a different viewpoint from the one pursued in the present essay, the risk of art collapsing into the generic was recognized by Clement Greenberg who, especially in a series of seminars he held at Bennington College in 1971, denounced the inconsistencies of those practices (e.g., pop art, minimal art, and conceptual art) that had gone “far out” of the specific media of painting and sculpture and thus verged on the “generic.” See Clement Greenberg, Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste, introduction by Charles Harrison (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). For a discussion of the becoming generic of the creative and five paradigmatic cases of Italian artists who, since the 1960s, have variously tackled the implications of the generic, see Gabriele Guercio, “L’opera d’arte e il divenire generico del creativo: cinque momenti ‘italiani’ (?),” in Il Conflitto Evanescente: Arte Italiana, 1960–2010, eds. Gabriele Guercio and Anna Martirrolo (Rome: Maxxi and Electa, 2010), 343–389.
Será como la Antología Griega, 
aún más distante, 
cómo una playa en invierno 
para otro asombro y otra indiferencia.

(In a thousand years nothing will be left 
of all that’s been written this century. 
They'll read loose sentences, traces 
of lost women, 
fragments of motionless children, 
your slow green eyes 
simply will not exist. 
It will be like the Greek Anthology, 
but even further away, 
like a beach in winter 
for another wonder, another indifference.)

Poetry would seem to be the mode of writing that anticipates this oblivion, pre-dismantling reality into loose sentences and traces. For switching from poetry to prose, a mode that does not think about the future at all, perhaps, Bolaño has been accused, by some real-life confrères in poetic absolutism, of selling out.17

Part of the appeal of the novel in the United States is its portrayal of life in Mexico City in the 1970s, an urban pastoral where the indolent drifting of the young and the creative seems unstructured by telephones or money, and undistracted by television or advertising. One of the hypotheses of this essay is that a fault-line in thinking about the ambivalence of creativity opened up in the 1970s between, on the one hand, the United States and, on the other, Latin America. Although the asymmetry is perhaps no longer so striking today, a retrospective view on that moment is revelatory. The fault-line involved differing attitudes of young people to electronic (not yet digital) culture, especially so-called popular music and cinema, and to poetry. Bolaño’s characters meet in a Chinese café, drink coffee, eat slices of pizza, shoplift from bookstores, and wrangle about prosody and literary value. They rarely connect to the electronic media, and never seem to enjoy it when they do. By contrast, no one growing up in the United States in the 1970s could escape television, radio, cinema, popular music, and the blandishments of consumer culture, or even wanted to. Everyone accepted the electronic media and the offerings of the networks and the recording and film industries as the basic framework of life.

Bolaño was pointing to a distinction not only between the United States and Mexico but also between the United States and the rest of the world. For in Europe, too, we would suggest, the twenty-year-old could still believe, in 1975, in the possibility of leading a “poetic” life, of “poetizing,” and this despite, or perhaps because of, diminished chances of employment in a faltering economy. This is the context for his status as the last of the poètes maudits, a key to his contemporary appeal. In an interview shortly before his death, Bolaño said: “What interested me, at twenty years old, more than writing poetry, because I also wrote poetry (in reality, I only wrote poetry), what I wanted was to live like a poet. For me being a poet meant being revolutionary and completely open to all cultural manifestations, all sexual expressions, in the end, being open to every experience with drugs.”18 The growing sense of social and cultural stagnation in the 1970s caused anxiety as well as rebellion. The hope of radical change stopped being associated with the future prospect of an overall revolution: it fueled a praxis pursued here and now in daily life and defiant of determined political agendas like those epitomized by the notions of party, state, and class. Many youths felt they were outsiders both because of their own choice and because no institution could represent their outlook and aspirations. The book that perhaps best conjures up the feverish atmosphere of those years is A Thousand Plateaus (1980) by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The authors defended the possibility of “rhizomatic” forms of life, art, and knowledge that would challenge the capitalistic status quo through the creation of a multitude of non-hierarchical modes of interaction involving material and immaterial forces, signs and humans, things and animals.19

In 1975, the European or the Mexican twenty-year-old embraced existence itself as poetical and so evaded the grip of institutions and the umbrella of broadcasts even in the heart of the city. This superiority to society’s program was the precondition for a refusal of society’s most conspicuous options and ultimately for the resort to violent protest that marked the European and Latin American, but not—with some significant exceptions—the North American 1970s. The North American, by contrast, seems to have known from the start that the modern city overwhelms a life modeled on poetry and compels affirmation of the already-provided; that the city is anyway moribund and that the most comfortable matrix for the imagination is the suburban home; that dreams of re-creating society through violent action are futile; and that the only hope for escape was the fantasy of the road trip that leads away from city and suburb alike.

The Latin American and European 1970s still nurtured a pre-generic concept of creativity. Creativity was still centered in distinctive individuals: it was still rare and precious, its destinations were unforeseeable, it was connected

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17 For Bolaño’s own comments on the difference between poetry and prose, see Bolaño, The Last Interview and Other Conversations (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Melville House, 2009), for example pp. 44-45, 67, 88-89.
18 Bolaño, The Last Interview, 78.
to particular skills and know-how. The North American model, meanwhile, pointed ahead to genericity. *The Savage Detectives* detects this rift. The protagonists move to the fading rhythms of European avant-gardism even as another model looms, unmentioned and undescribed within the novel, north of the border. The bulk of the novel, its middle, is a long series of testimonials and narrations culled evidently from interviews with poets and editors conducted by Belano and Lima between 1976 and 1996, the extension of their quest for true poetry, but also by an unnamed detective who for unknown reasons is on their trail.

The circuits of the protagonists of *The Savage Detectives* converge at the home of Joaquim Font, an architect on the path to dementia, evidently a villa in a bourgeois quarter of the city, Colonia Condesa. Font’s daughter Angelica has recently won a prize for poetry. Here the youths sprawl, smoke marijuana, have sex, take naps, raid the refrigerator, talk about poetry. Except for the content of their conversations—poetry—these could be scenes from a North American novel set in suburbia, say, *Infinite Jest* (1996) by David Foster Wallace, a book that masks its opinion about the future of art by regrounding it in nature and self. The romantic tends to discount the “given” and instead considers reality open to events whose novelty cannot be accounted for on the basis of what is already known. Classical skepticism counters this credulous belief in the limitless spectrum of creativity by maintaining that reality is a combination of given elements more or less available to scrutiny and any supposed novelty not only fits into a broader frame of reference, but can always finally be apprehended, thus reconnecting the unknown to the known. Walter Benjamin, for instance, denounced the lie of the “rigid and non-dialectical dichotomy between creating and fabricating on which the aesthetic of creativity rests.”

Bolaño’s portrayal of the Mexican 1970s in *The Savage Detectives* reveals what we might call a “creativity gap”: a divide between two ways of thinking about creativity that also implied two different ways of thinking in the 1970s about what it meant to be a teenager, a student, a worker, an artist, an intellectual; about the purpose of art; about the gradient between high art and entertainment or “popular” culture; about technology. The asymmetry between North American and European/Latin American world-views has no doubt been mitigated since the 1970s. Today the two ways of thinking about creativity may no longer map onto the collective youthful experiences of nations or continents. Yet in reanimating the 1970s the book poses a contemporary question. The book dramatizes an alternative that has structured twentieth-century intellectual life, especially since the Second World War: a choice between, on the one hand, creation conceived as a pure addition to the world undervisible from premises, and on the other hand, creation conceived as a recombination of already existing elements. We will call the first option the *romantic* position on creativity, and the second the *classical* position. Romantics of any period, following the lead of the original Romantic poets of around 1800, repudiate classicism as a sterile manipulation of readymade formulas. The romantic seeks instead to renew language by regrounding it in nature and self. The romantic tends to discount the “given” and instead considers reality open to events whose novelty cannot be accounted for on the basis of what is already known. Classical skepticism counters this credulous belief in the limitless spectrum of creativity by maintaining that reality is a combination of given elements more or less available to scrutiny and any supposed novelty not only fits into a broader frame of reference, but can always finally be apprehended, thus reconnecting the unknown to the known. Walter Benjamin, for instance, denounced the lie of the “rigid and non-dialectical dichotomy between creating and fabricating on which the aesthetic of creativity rests.”

Among intellectuals the classical or skeptical understanding of creativity gained traction throughout the 1960s and can be said to have dominated by 1980. The new voice of literary analysis was arch, disillusioned, even clinical. Roland Barthes presented literature as a closed system of signs. Italo Calvino argued that poetic creation begins in idle combinatorial play that invites unforeseen meanings. Both Barthes and Calvino were disciples of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who held that the meaning of myths does not precede, but rather follows, the myth-maker’s bricolage: “Mythical thought… is imprisoned in the events and experiences which it never tires of ordering and re-ordering in its search to find them a meaning.”

The creator, in other words, does not add anything to the stock of ideas, but only reshuffles what is already at hand. By 1980 the pronouncements of a mid-century phenomenological critic such as Gaston Bachelard, whose *Poétique de l’espace* (1957) opened with a reflection on the radical undervisibility of poetic language, had come to sound quaint: “L’acte poétique n’a pas de passé.”

Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and Calvino all share the view that novelty is a trick of perspective. Any apparent innovation, they argued, will recede back into a known pattern once the larger framework is recognized. A recognition of
poetry is destined to be superseded by a more definitive recognition. If religion is the willingness to arrest such a dilation of perspectives and to try to live with just one, then the skepticism about novelty among postwar critics might well be understood as an aspect of postwar secularization and pragmatism.

The implications of the combinatorial or classical approach varied from field to field in the 1960s and 1970s. One form it took was Michel Foucault’s questioning of assumptions inherited from the humanistic tradition about the integrity of the self and the body. Another was the enthusiasm among American literary scholars for structuralist and hyperstructuralist approaches to the text, as well as their re-embrace of the concept of rhetoric. Still other forms were the suspicion of master narratives that led to microhistory; the rejection of stylistic purism that led to postmodernism in architecture; and in painting the irony and impiety of artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol. Many artists, though not all, abandoned both the utopian uses of random material in the production of an artwork and claiming that semiotic autonomy. Theories of modernism, objecting to undifferentiated modern painting bears evidence of a revolution inherent in its material and engagement cultures. From within the epoch of generic creativity, the opposing stances of the modernists and the anti-modernists look more and more like spectral twins of one another. Skepticism, reintegrating the unknown into the known, ends up maintaining that everything is potentially equal to everything else precisely because there is no possibility of escaping predetermined frames of knowledge or experience. Credulity, suggesting that innovation may occur anywhere regardless of predetermined means of expression, ends up confirming that everything is potentially equal to everything else precisely because all is possible. Modernism and anti-modernism are interchangeable in that they both seek a purity of sort—the former associating purity with form, the latter with life—and thus risk collapsing into a nullifying sameness where neither form nor life can ever guarantee the achievement of the originality, the absolute singularity, associated with that sought-after purity.

Although the classical position on creativity was dominant in the 1960s and 1970s in both Europe and the United States, it took in each continent different forms and was grounded in different premises. In Europe, we sense simply a fatigue induced by war and reconstruction and a desire to shock all the pieties and consoling commonplaces of Bildung. In America, structural-
ism appealed perhaps to a native strain of anti-foundationism, born out of the critique of Europe’s ancien régime.

Poetry had been the symbolic form par excellence of romantic creativity. After World War Two, especially in western Europe (not including Britain), poetry suffered an enormous loss of prestige. Poetry understood as the shelter of creativity now appeared to many as a mere relic of an earlier age. Its extension into the present seemed artificial and doomed, and certainly elitist and anti-democratic. Poetry retained a mainstream profile in the United States through the 1960s, in part because of the unquestioned stature of T.S. Eliot among critics and teachers. The experiential poets of the postwar period, such as Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, remain objects of fascination and admiration. Poets linked to the neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s, such as John Ashbery and Robert Creeley, retain formidable reputations. But the readership for poetry is tiny compared to the readership for the novel. In continental Europe the profile of poetry is even lower. Many intellectuals seem to believe that the great tradition of poetry, so powerfully renewed in the early nineteenth century by Romanticism, was extinguished by World War II, surviving in a diminished though intense form only until the deaths of Paul Celan (1970) and Pier Paolo Pasolini (1975). Alain Badiou, in a kind of open letter to Czeslaw Milosz, condescendingly chided the Polish poet for not understanding the nature of the central modern poetic tradition, exemplified by Mallarmé and Celan but now sadly defunct (28-35). It was as if Badiou were saying that poetry was once great but no longer can be, and only Eastern European or Russian or Irish or Latin American or possibly North American poets have not yet received the news. Now every September all Paris anticipates an abundant harvest not of new poems but of new novels. And that is exactly what Roberto Bolaño’s “romantic dogs” set off in search for poetry.

Walking the Plank

Before turning back to The Savage Detectives, we will focus briefly on one of the most important of all postwar novels and one of Bolaño’s major points of reference: Rayuela (1963; translated into English in 1966 as Hopscotch) by the Argentinian Julio Cortázar (1914-1984). Cortázar, like so many other artists of the twentieth century, and unlike Bolaño, sought his muse in Paris, and that is where he wrote Rayuela. This, too, is a novel that might tell us whether there is an alternative to simply surrendering to the model of generic creativity, and whether that alternative might not in fact be found within that very model.

Rayuela is a novel that handles the problem of creativity by radically splitting content and form. The characters live in Bohemia but their story is fragmented into 155 texts of varying length which can be read, module-like, in different sequences. The physical book offers one sequence, but Cortázar, in a “Table of Instructions,” proposes another. Ultimately every reader can rearrange the sections in any way he or she likes. Through this device the novel enacts a classical combinatorial aesthetic. Each sequencing of the text-modules generates a new novel, and yet nothing new has been added. The device works because the lives of the characters in Rayuela are in fact so unstructured, so “poetic,” that an arbitrary rearrangement of the episodes can still make a sort of sense. Because there is no natural sequence of events, no inner logic, one sequence is as satisfactory as another. The protagonist, Horacio Oliveira, slips between the institutions of modern life. He observes, he writes, he moves about Paris and later Buenos Aires, he argues with his friends and with his lover La Maga. They create the plenitude of their lives as they live it. Only a classical artist could endow such an existence with structure. The invitation to scramble the novel’s sequence is a parody of classical composition; the scrambling yields no narrative capable of persisting.

Section 41, one of the longest, thematizes the two approaches to creativity, the closed and the open. Oliveira is in his apartment in Buenos Aires straightening crooked nails, one by one, with a hammer. This tedious activity is the first of several figurations in this section of closed or classical production, which allows meaning to follow making rather than drive it. For when asked what he wants the nails for, Oliveira responds, reader of Lévi-Strauss that he is, “I’m not sure yet… .It’s my idea that as long as I have straight nails I’ll know what to use them for.” (Section 59 of the novel consists solely of a quotation from Tristes tropiques. When the novel is read in the mixed-up sequence prescribed by the “Table of Instructions,” this section immediately precedes section 41.) Later Oliveira opens up the Dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy at random and composes a micro-narrative based on sixteen words beginning with the letters “cl”. He writes a nonsense poem based on a list of Burmese names he finds in a publication of UNESCO. Oliveira hails his friend Traveler, who lives across the street, and asks for nails and yerba to make mate, an infusion. Both Oliveira and Traveler are too lazy to descend the stairs and climb up to the other apartment, so they decide to build a cantilevered bridge with planks, anchored at the ends by furniture and encyclopedia volumes. Traveler’s girlfriend Talita is persuaded to ferry the yerba and the nails across the street, at a perilously high altitude, by straddling and sliding along the planks. The bridge of planks is a solution to a problem but one that creates, or almost creates, much bigger problems.

The bridge is the symbol in the novel of the open-ended poetic process that Lévi-Strauss and other critics have convinced Oliveira is no longer possible. Talita and the planks together are like a work that delivers some content that could really be delivered some more straightforward way and anyway is not very significant in its own right. Talita, the muse, is impelled forward...
by the bricoleurs at either end, but her destiny is in suspense (the passage is comic but harrowing) and may exceed the intentions of the amateur carpenters. Her sortie from the private sphere into the public creates a spectacle for the passersby below. She finds a trajectory through space that did not exist before. This is poesis.

The empty space between the buildings and below the planks suggest that the void out of which poetry emerges is contained inside the geometry of life, invisible until someone builds a bridge over it. Later we will return to the association between void and poetry. For now let us notice that the bridge of planks discloses life, a polygon linking writer, friends, lovers, and the public in the street, as a preposterous construction. Oliveira, like Talita when she reaches the middle of the bridge, is paralyzed by the ambiguity of creativity. Cortázar, like his creation Oliveira, is too aware of his own belatedness to the planks discloses life, a polygon linking writer, friends, lovers, and the public association between void and poetry. For now let us notice that the bridge of planks discloses life, a polygon linking writer, friends, lovers, and the public in the street, as a preposterous construction. Oliveira, like Talita when she reaches the middle of the bridge, is paralyzed by the ambiguity of creativity. Cortázar, like his creation Oliveira, is too aware of his own belatedness to the historical avant-gardes to try to represent creativity straightforwardly. Instead he ironizes it through the antic episode of the planks, thus barely escaping the poet’s paralysis by writing a novel about poesis.

Bolaño’s *Savage Detectives* updates the problem. Here it is no longer the individual artist who treats the dilemma of combination versus creation as if it were an existential dilemma. In *The Savage Detectives*, the specter of the classical or skeptical approach to literary creation is much more menacing because it is so pervasive in society as to be invisible. The disillusionment about poetry is no longer the dry, academic voice that confuses Oliveira, a good-hearted Romantic Dog. Instead, the classical approach has exploded into a shapeless, all-over culture of the electronic and mass media, infinitely more threatening to the few remaining Romantics because it pretends to be itself romantic. Bolaño’s protest against generic creativity must take on a different form from Cortázar’s.

The older, more benign classical model associated in *Rayuela* with combinatorics figures in *The Savage Detectives* only as the obsession of the adolescent poets, spun out in the cafés of Mexico City and later in the northward-bound car, with the traditional rules of prosody, the repertoire of metrical and rhyming formulas. The more menacing new classicism, the ruse of consumer-targeted generic creativity, does not need to appear in the novel because it is ubiquitous, certainly for readers of the novel.

Cortázar and his characters, in Paris in the 1950s, listen to jazz. Bolaño by contrast suppresses the presence of North America. None of his characters listens to popular music. North America does not exist in the novel, except as the horizon. The road trip is cantilevered out northward from Mexico City, into the emptiness of the desert, but unlike Oliveira’s bridge it finds no anchorage on the other end. Bolaño’s novel reflects in this way on the intimacy between Mexico and the United States that has been created by immigration and labor, short-term and long-term. Cesárea, who bears the name of an emperor, is a substitute for the other destination, the one barely mentioned by the passengers in the car even as they run right up against the closed frontier, the empire to the north built on immigration. (Her surname, Tinajero, means “the one who makes large earthenware jugs”; later we will return to this allusion to the image of the prime creator, the creating god, as a potter.)

Bernard Stiegler, in his reflection on the suppression of the problem of technology within Western thought, points to a foundational passage in Western thought, the paradoxe articulated by Meno in Plato’s dialogue of that name.28 Meno asks Socrates, “How will you inquire into a thing when you are wholly ignorant of what it is? Even if you happen to bump right into it, how will you know it is the thing you didn’t know?” (*Meno*, 80d1-4). This riddle surely threatens any quest for the origins of creativity undertaken by the romantically inclined, one who refuses to believe that everything is already given. The romantic may head backwards toward the source, but how will she recognize it and know to stop? In *The Savage Detectives* Ulisses Lima says that the Visceral Realists seek the origin of poetry by moving backward: “Backward, gazing at a point in the distance, but moving away from it, walking straight toward the unknown” (7).

The road trip ends in farcical and tragic failure. The encounter with Cesárea Tinajero yields only puzzles. Because the physical end of the book is not the latest event narrated in the book—that occurs sixty pages earlier—it is not a real conclusion. The novel actually contains several possible conclusions, for example the commentary by Belano and Lima on the only surviving poem by Cesárea, a pictogram bearing the title “Sión” (422-24). Another is the descent into a cave by Belano, at that point working as a watchman at a campground in Spain, to rescue a fallen child (453-58). His courageous but unassuming descent, secured only by a rope around his waist, is the equivalent of the episode with the planks in *Rayuela*. This time, however, the venture has real meaning and all comic possibilities are suppressed. Instead of the primordial but pointless leap into the void that Talita risked, we are shown an eminently practical operation that overcame the cowardice and superstition of the locals, who were afraid they would meet the devil if they ventured into the cave. The meaning of Belano’s act is brought out by the comparison with episode of the Cave of Montesinos in Part Two, chapter 22, of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, which Bolaño is surely imitating. In that scene Quixote, attached to a rope, descends into a supposedly enchanted cave in order to see for himself the wonders that it is reputed to conceal. Half an hour later he is hoisted up, fast asleep. But he recounts a marvelous tale of encounters with the living dead in crystal chambers. Everyone suspects that Quixote has dreamed it all, but he sticks to his story, only once hinting, in a confidence whispered in Sancho Panza’s ear at the end of chapter 41, that

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he saw nothing at all in the Cave of Montesinos. In this way Cervantes hides from the reader the truth about Quixote’s self-awareness. The episode in the cave, invisible to us, marks a possible transformation in Quixote’s sense of himself, from a knight-errant, a quester, into a poet, a creator. We learn from Belano’s adventure, meanwhile, that he shares Quixote’s generosity and freedom from superstition. Like Quixote, he never falls into the error—Oliveira’s error, debilitating to a poet—of observing himself observing. Both descents are images of the Ur-sprung, the leap toward an unseen target that allows language to add to the world and not merely describe it.29

Poetry in The Savage Detectives is a symbol of creativity that is neither rarified nor generic. In this way Bolaño points toward a path out of the aporia of the classical and romantic approaches to creativity.

**Pottery and Pictogram**

Do we recognize the savage detectives’s quest for the origins of poetry as the response to an irresistible impulse? Is it worth emulating their descent into the cave and their slide toward the unseen? Is it possible to push the quest further? Before answering these questions we have to decide: what did the savage detectives actually find?

The path to an answer begins at the “poem” that Cesárea published in the avant-garde journal Caborca in the 1920s, the journal she herself had edited: her only published poem. Amadeo Salvatierra, who had known her, shows it to the detectives Arturo and Ulisse in Mexico City in January 1976; this incident occurs two-thirds of the way into the novel (396-99, 421-24). The poem is entitled “Sión,” a word evoking a site simultaneously real and ideal, for it can be taken to refer to the city of Jerusalem as well as to its mountain and the long-perished Temple erected there by King Solomon (“Zion” in Spanish is “Sion,” however, without the accent); or even the Swiss town of that name, as Amadeo points out. The poem occupies a borderland between the virtual and the actual. It is not in fact a poem but a three-stage graphic puzzle or pictogram that seems to be about a vehicle moving across three different landscapes:

29 See the commentary on Heidegger’s *Origin of the Work of Art* by Karsten Harries: “If reality does not transcend language [this is the axiom of the classicists, GG/CSW], what sense can we make of language changing, of the establishment of an altogether new language game, an establishment that would be...an Ur-sprung, a primordial leap that establishes the being of beings anew.” Harries, *Art Matters* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 110.
paring two dogs / crossed on the stair the Freudian sea / vessel of a wounded gut...,” a hand-drawn wavy line and a jagged line. The verses are too enigmatic—they involve the crosscutting of two plot lines—to say much more than that the agitated drawn lines represent the journey of the ego through life, *el mar freudiano*. In addition, it is worth bearing in mind that in many cultures the sea and water are associated with origins and birth, so that the crossing of *el mar freudiano* conjures up experiences in which the engendering or creating of something is a process that interlocks both conscious and unconscious states. With Bolaño, dreaming is in fact tied up with drawing and poetizing. The prose poem “When I was a boy” includes these phrases:

> When I was a boy I used to dream something like this [straight line that becomes wavy then jagged]... The straight lines is the sea when calm, the wavy line is the sea with waves, and the jagged line is a storm... Well, I guess there isn’t much aesthetic left in me... [drawing of a boat]... A little boat... [drawing of a boat]... [drawing of a boat].

Someone—perhaps the hunchback, mentioned earlier in the poem, who is sitting in a tree trying to grasp “the frequencies of reality”—speaks about dreaming the line that becomes jagged. His interlocutor offers a reading of the line. The other responds: “I guess there isn’t much aesthetic left in me,” and is not clear what he means; perhaps that he was once “aesthetic,” or authentically poetic, when he was a boy dreaming in pictograms. The drawings of the boat are placed in quotation marks to suggest that they “count” as expression. Finally, the prose poem entitled “The Sea” represents the three states of the sea as horizontal lines inscribed in boxes, and a larger box depicting the little boat traversing a sea that becomes ever more agitated. The poem’s comment on the drawing is:

> The straight line made me feel calm. The curved line made me uneasy. I sensed danger but liked the smoothness; up and down. The past line was agitation. My penis hurt, my belly hurt, etc.

Very simply, these poems (and “Sión”) are saying that the elemental task of poetry is the delivery of some concise account of the experience of living with contingency and pain, a task so plain and yet so difficult that it calls for a translation of words into icons.

To judge from the effect it has on the detectives, there is quite a bit more to Cesárea’s poem than this. The poem “Sión” rejects an academic-elitistic view of poetry and creativity, renouncing any hope of legitimation from the outside based on interaction with a codified network of conventions that supposedly sustain poetical traditions in human history. It is as if this poem offered a banal, ludic clue to what a poetry that tried to reach back behind language would be like. Such a poem would guide us back into the shared, pre-predicative *Lebenswelt*, a realm of uncoded signs where we proceed not by interpretation but by recognition. In an interview of 1999, Bolaño said that “literature is not made of words alone;” in other words, it can be translated without a disqualifying loss of meaning. This is usually thought to be more true about novels than about poetry. If the pictogram is a limit case of translatability, then the pictogram would seem to represent the antithesis of poetry, which is hard to translate. And yet poetry is the mode that elicits, in Bolaño’s writing, the pictographic experiments, perhaps because poetry is felt to be the true host of the relics of an originary experience that resists translation: an experience of which the variety of forms, languages, and literary genres which have been known so far would simply be the transient media.

By interpreting “Sión” this way, do we not risk assimilating it to the suspicious scenario of generic creativity sketched out at the opening of the present essay? For it would seem that, pushing their quest for the origins of poetry further, the savage detectives find themselves forced to acknowledge that the era of specific talents and specialized artworks is over; that anything goes and anybody can compose or act creatively. Unwittingly, the savage detectives end up discovering exactly that “becoming generic” of the creative that we have tried to describe in its tantalizing ambivalence. Is there really no escape from the overwhelming magma of genericity, even for the canny detectives? Why would Bolaño seal his novel with a joke and a shrug of resignation? Are the heroes of his novel simply meant to learn from Cesárea’s poem that poetical individuals can only defend their vocation by striking a pose of ironic, detached despair *vis-à-vis* the threats of the generic?

We believe that there is still more to Cesárea’s poem. Her very name is a crucial clue. For the surname Tinajero, again, means “the one who makes large earthenware jugs.” (Both Cesárea and Tinajero are unusual names.) In this way he casts Cesárea as a creating goddess. (*Jeremiah* 18: 6: “O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.” *Romans* 9: 20-21: “O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?”) (Note that she is first mentioned in the novel as “somebody called Cesárea Tinajero or Tinaja” (7), suggesting that she is also the pot itself, not only the potter.) Pottery, together with the textile arts, constitutes a founding art of civilization. In the analysis of Lévi-Strauss, pottery draws a full circle linking the earth and the body, the natural and the cultural realms. The clay used by the potter is extracted from earth, molded and fired to turn into a container for the new content of

30 *The Unknown University*, 28-29.
31 *The Unknown University*, 354-5.
32 *The Unknown University*, 356-7.
33 *The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, 50.
They instance a gap or hole whose recognition each time upsets anew the status quo in the domain of signs as well as in reality at large. So despite its appearance of poverty, there is a sort of richness in Cesária’s pictogram. The work fosters an understanding of origins close to the model that Heidegger posited in his “Origin of the Work of Art” (1936). Heidegger’s understanding of Ursprung or origin chiefly designates self-generation: the advent of being rising up and growing out of itself. For Heidegger the work of art does not need to seek its origins elsewhere, but it is itself an origin. The work is a new beginning that forces the transformation of our habitual world. The merit of the Heideggerian model is that it provides a response to our lack of knowledge about origins, even if it refrains from addressing that lack directly.

Cesária’s pictogram, in confronting the same issue, delivers a curious response that simultaneously exhibits both lack and excess of knowledge about origins. This response might be thought of as a comic version, or parody, of the Heideggerian model of Ursprung, in that the pictogram repeatedly “builds” and “unbuilds” the very dynamics of self-generation. On the one hand, it supports self-generation by alerting us to the unlimited power of the creative that, starting from clay, may give form to anything and reveal anybody as a potential poet or potter. On the other hand, it mocks or undoes that very prospect of unremitting abundance by revealing the emptiness exploited, or even produced, by the creative act, as well as by tending toward a formless state symbolically comparable to excretion. Due to its duplicity, Cesária’s pictogram/poem is a cogent reminder that in poetical and creative work we may well end up with shit. In fact this was exactly the case with Piero Manzoni’s Merda d’artista (1961), an artist and work explicitly mentioned by the savage detectives at the moment when Amadeo Salvatierra explained to them why he considered “Sión” a poem: “If that woman had told me,” Amadeo says, “that a piece of her shit wrapped in a shopping bag was a poem I would have believed it” (421). Manzoni’s work, which also verges on joke and parody, is also a completely serious exposure of this ‘other side’ of pottery or sculpture in the era of the genericity of the creative.

In grasping the duplicity of the pictogram, the savage detectives may have found what is potentially valuable in generic creativity. Even if we grant them the power of unlimited, generic self-generation, creative forms are nonetheless intimately tied up with a void. Like the pot, the pictogram/poem suggests continuity between created form and the void. The duplicity of Cesária’s work points to an awareness of our non-knowledge about origins. It makes apparent an urge to dispense with the classical vs. romantic binarism. The savage detectives may have found that a new understanding of the creative ought to discourage us not only from behaving as if we knew or could even

food. And food itself undergoes an analogous process, albeit in reverse. It is first placed in a clay container, then cooked, then processed in the body in digestion, and finally ejected and returned to earth as excrement. Clay and excrement represent the starting and ending polarities of the technological and the physiological. Pottery is the art “où le passage s’accomplit de la façon la plus directe, avec le moins d’étapes intermédiaires entre la matière première et le produit, sorti déjà formé des mains de l’artisan avant même d’être soumis à la cuisson.” The fewest number of passages, then, between the natural and the artificial, the raw and the cooked, the hand and the form. Pottery moves almost directly from formless earth to formed pot. Thus does Bolano, through his character’s name, suggest the possibility of operating creatively by uncovering discrete gaps between materials and forms, form and content, continuity in nature and changes in culture. Because the movement from formless to formed is irreversible, the art of pottery came to be associated, in myths, with anal retention, and ultimately with jealously in general.

The pot or vase represents both the emptiness around which it is created and the possibility of filling that emptiness. It is a striking case of a signifier without a particular signified. In Lacanese, we might say that the pot demonstrates that the taking shape of the signifier within the order of the Symbolic is tantamount to the occurring of a gap within the order of the Real. According to Lacan, the potter creates the vase “just as [does] the mythical creator, ex nihilo, starting with a hole.” The vase reveals the enfolding of something and the void: the hole that makes up the vase bears evidence of the nexus of being and nonbeing, through the work of creation, find themselves intertwined.

These remarks on pottery help explain why Bolano offers as the only surviving relic of Cesária’s poetry nothing more than a pictogram. Cesária’s “Sión” is not a passive ratification of the generic. It does not uncritically make the claim that, when it comes to poietical and artistic work, any form or medium will do. On the contrary, the poem suggests that once we recognize the threat of the generic nullification of all differences, we may become extremely sensitive to the possibility that even a nondescript fragment may alert us to the birth of a singularity and increase our sense of the vanishing origins. Just as with the vase, such a fragment may generate a movable reciprocity between existence and nonexistence, nature and culture. A work generating such reciprocity resists the law of a totalizing equality. It epitomizes something like the well-known “butterfly effect” where a small change in one dimension may result in large differences in other dimensions. This multidimensional resonance is the faculty that Cesária’s poem and the pottery share.

tually know about origins, but also of hiding our lack of knowledge about origins. For those are two equally sinister maneuvers. The positions we have designated as classic and romantic, skeptical and credulous, modernist and anti-modernist all remain entangled in the illusory paths opened by these maneuvers. While modernism operates as if one could eventually know about origins, classicism and skepticism hide their nonknowing. While credulity and romanticism verge on mythology as they tend to envision either the nonknowing as a mystical stance or the future knowledge about origins as the granting of a messianic promise, anti-modernism can be rendered barren by the very de-differentiation between art and life it sets forth.

**As if Unmediated**

Poetry in *The Savage Detectives* is a path out of the aporia of classicism vs. romanticism, and the symbol of a creativity that is neither rarefied nor generic. Bolaño’s novel vindicates the primacy of poetry as the paradigm of art in general. Such vindications have recurred in Western culture at least since Hölderlin and Hegel. Yet *The Savage Detectives* gives it a remarkable twist. It is unclear whether Csárea’s pictogram, with its odd mix of ordinariness and esoterism, should be regarded as a serious or a burlesque transposition of one of the chief arguments in favor of poetry’s primacy. Briefly put, the argument is that the medium of poetry, language, is humanness itself—the medium of “dwelling,” as Heidegger suggested, and a privileged path to knowledge of Being. Poetry is therefore not only the artistic form closest to the unmediated realm of pure existence, but may also escape the skeptical-credulous dichotomy. This is because there can be no “origin” of poetry outside of language which, grasped in its “originary” sense and mission, is equal to poetry itself.

Poetry, like pottery, achieves its “artistic” metamorphoses with minimal mediation. Just as pottery goes almost directly from formless earth to formed pot, so poetry goes almost directly from the words of everyday speech to the formed poem. This characteristic of the art of poetry is even more evident when we consider the visual arts today. In that context we have a diametrically opposite situation. The production and reception of artworks seem to be thoroughly systemic, self-referential, and trapped in the antagonism between autonomy and heteronomy. If we were to look for a “potter” among contemporary artists, who would it be?

Consider two exhibitions recently staged by museums in New York City. Maurizio Cattelan’s *All* at the Guggenheim Museum (2011) was a retrospective in which the artist installed most of his works to date *en masse*, suspended in a seeming random fashion from the oculus of the Guggenheim’s rotunda. Dedifferentiating one work from another, the installation enhanced the granting of a messianic promise, anti-modernism can be rendered barren by the very de-differentiation between art and life it sets forth.

Marina Abramovic is perhaps a better candidate. The centerpiece of her 2010 MOMA retrospective was a live, ten-weeks-long performance titled *The Artist is Present* that featured Abramovic herself sitting motionless at a table across from whoever among the public wished to sit down with her. The table between artist and sitter was completely bare, or absent. The work may be seen as a cogent allegory of MOMA’s mission, of its documentation of the history of twentieth-century art in its two-fold search for purity and origins either through introspection and semiotic reductivism or by means of overcoming the burden of the very physicalness of the art object. More than Cattelan’s *All*, Abramovic’s performance is closer to pottery in that it generates a sense of presence out of the very emptiness it creates. It is equally relevant that the work expressed a desire to shape a setting for a work that could dispense with mediations altogether. No longer maintaining a precise limit between artist and beholder, no longer having determinable qualities aside from those related to the look of the two seated persons and the table, the work pursues the impossible task of enhancing a pure awareness of “immediacy.”

It might be objected that the difficulties met in identifying a “potter” in the context of the contemporary visual arts can be met in the context of poetry too. Bolaño’s novel is a case in point, despite the case it makes for the paradigmatic status of poetry as the least mediated artistic form. Not only is the “pottery” generally hard to recognize in the book, but Csárea’s pictogram/poem is so uninteresting—who would want to read a book of pictograms?—that its poietical qualities will remain obscure unless one is prepared to build a chain of mediations to construe them. And yet this contradiction of *The Savage Detectives* is enlightening. It points to the final clue that the heroes of the narrative may have found in their quest.

Although the pictogram/poem is in itself uninspiring, two points about it are worth making. First, the pictogram is an idiosyncratic poem, transcending the conventions usually associated with an artistic system. It is the only published work by a poet who produced very little poetry and is therefore a typically jealous, even anal-retentive, potter. (Note that *cesárea* means “Caesarian birth.”) Second, the pictogram/poem is only revelatory when it is framed, first, by poetry (the magazine it appeared in, the conversations

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of her peers and her readers) and, second, by Bolaño’s narrative. The pictogram depends on these framing devices. There is some tension between these two observations. The first point suggests that the pictogram/poem can be grasped only by means of some empathic attunement with Cesárea’s elusive creative mind. The second point implies that Cesárea’s legacy can never be realized until its unknown quanta are transplanted into and adapted to the realm of the known. It is remarkable that The Savage Detectives manages to balance these two possibilities and yet avoid both reiterating the romantic versus classicist opposition and undermining the singularity of Cesárea’s act. And this exemplary balance is the ultimate finding awaiting the detectives.

The reasoning that guides such a balance may be described as follows. Poetry, like pottery, does not have to concern itself with the problem of artistic autonomy because poetry and pottery do nothing more than reveal a hitherto undisclosed facet of what was already available as words and clay. Because they are just transformations of what already is, they are never cast forth into the alienated condition of autonomy. It would nonetheless be wrong to assume that poetry and pottery involve no mediations at all. In the epoch of the becoming generic of the creative, as the lack of knowledge about origins becomes common knowledge, not only can everything be potentially equated to everything else, but also everything potentially carries within it a certain amount of mediation and partakes of ever broader aggregates of signs and sense. Genericity makes everything look as if it is connected, or worth connecting, to everything else. Under these conditions, is it hard to imagine a singularity of being that exists without the support of a discursive substratum and mechanisms of translation. And yet Bolaño’s novel suggests that such existence is in fact possible. The whole narrative of The Savage Detectives advances the message that the specific, singular essence of the creative does not necessarily vanish into the de-differentiated totality of the generic. Rather it may find its niche “inside” another form or medium, in this case, a novel. The task is how to create or recognize a niche that can envelop the creative. It is also important that the enveloping niche is understood as more real than the entity it shelters. The Savage Detectives is indeed a real thing in the world, whereas Cesárea’s poem has no reality outside the novel.

Both the heroes of The Savage Detectives and the novel’s readers glimpse, in the grail of Cesárea’s pictogram/poem, creativity in possibly its most basic and least mediated state. The point of their shared quest is therefore not so much to decipher the ultimate meaning of Cesárea’s act, but rather to understand how its poietical core works and how it radiates through the literary field and through life. Cesárea’s non-existent pictogram/poem is lodged in the “clay” of an avant-garde poetry project, at once fictional and non-existent, which is in turn housed in a fictional dossier of reports and narratives, which are finally embedded in a real novel. Refining the Heideggerian model of Ursprung, Bolaño proposes that although the self-generation of Cesárea’s pictogram/poem will remain unknown, the “butterfly effect” of that event could nonetheless become perceivable once the pictogram/poem is housed inside a cascade of narratives. Insofar as it is unintelligible, the pictogram epitomizes the void around which the “vase” of the novel takes shape. The Heideggerian Ursprung is thus reconfigured as a coming into presence of a being tied to the non-being of the void. This reconfiguration completes the redemption of the apparently generic pictogram.

Just as the novel allows the pictogram/poem to appear, so the pictogram/poem allows the novel to structure itself. Poetry “takes shape” only inside the novel, and the shape it takes is that of a vanishing origin. This means not only that Bolaño creates an entire novel around that vanishing origin but also that the origin must vanish or be seen as vanishing in order for creative work to occur. The Savage Detectives suggests that the creative is not attached to the aesthetic properties of this or that medium (old, new, or reinvented as it may be). Rather the creative may gain its specificity and singularity as the agent of a quantum of the unknown—a quantum both recognized as such, and maintained within a form achieved by the smallest number of passages between the material and the immaterial domains, between life itself and the sphere of art. What the savage detectives may have found is that, even when it seems that everything is possible in art and anybody can operate creatively, there is still an impossibility worth fighting for: namely, the realization of artistic forms capable of containing the core of the creative, “almost as if” unmediated.