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The Life of the Night: Bolaño, Blanchot, and the Impoverishment of Openness

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the theme of openness in Roberto Bolaño’s novel *Monsieur Pain*. Drawing on Blanchot’s formulation of “the other night,” I locate in the hiccups present throughout Bolaño’s novel an openness that suspends and undoes itself, thus critiquing conceptions of openness as pure emptiness such as those at work in Agamben’s philosophy, and in the contemporary discourses around convenience and infinite possibility.

KEYWORDS

Roberto Bolaño; Maurice Blanchot; Giorgio Agamben; hiccups; openness; possibility; convenience; the other night; mesmerism

In his 2013 book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Jonathan Crary investigates our ever-increasing ability to do whatever we want, whenever we want. “24/7,” as anyone who has spent time in North America knows, is shorthand for 24 hours a day, seven days a week, often referring to opening hours, and Crary, throughout his book, employs the term to designate one of the most distinctive features of contemporary capitalism, its “principle of continuous functioning” (8): the fact that, at this moment in the development of capitalism, there is virtually no time during which its subjects are not taking part in it, even during that period—the night—traditionally regarded as outside the realm of production and consumption. When I buy something in the middle of the night, when I send out a tweet in the wee hours, when I pick up my phone in a moment of insomnia to check Facebook notifications, I am producing: generating advertising revenue, attracting others to various sites and platforms, aiding in the creation of “viral” trends—helping to turn the wheels of the information economy. No wonder, Crary notes, that we tend to sleep less and less: what 24/7 has done is to effectively erase the border between night and day, work and rest, and so forth, such that the time in which we now exist can be said to be completely open.¹

In Crary’s understanding, we are “captured” by this openness, which brings up an interesting question: how to resist the open, to push back against that which has no borders? This is not to suggest that resistance is impossible: as I write, a major effort is underway to #DeleteFacebook, given major privacy concerns around the social networking site—to resist the site’s abuses by leaving it. In a similar vein, Crary suggests that resistance lies in powering off and going to sleep—in other words, closing off an open space by re-erecting the border between waking and sleeping that is disappearing all around us. The irony of conceiving of sleep as resistance is not lost on Crary, yet his argument is entirely logical, and some of his book’s most powerful passages deal with the liberating nature of sleep’s unproductivity, and just how difficult it is for 24/7 to bear this unproductivity. I am personally suspicious of this strategy, in part because, to my mind, it buys into the message of 24/7: no one is forcing you to do anything of this, there is no true exercise of power here, you can do what you want anytime, including leaving 24/7. I am also suspicious of it because it relies on a strategy of closure: by seeking to re-erect borders, it exhibits a nostalgia for a world gone by—a world, one is told, of a simpler form of power, one that worked through strategies of exclusion rather than inclusion, was easier to combat, and so on. But Crary also suggests another strategy of resistance,
even if he does not explore it. Early in the text, he makes one of his central claims, that 24/7 “steadily undermines distinctions between day and night, between light and dark, and between action and repose” (17), and to develop this claim, he turns to a very well-known thinker: “To paraphrase Maurice Blanchot, it is both of and after the disaster, characterized by the empty sky, in which no star or sign is visible, in which one’s bearings are lost and orientation is impossible” (17). An endnote follows the word “impossible,” in which Crary refers to three pages of Blanchot’s 1980 book _The Writing of the Disaster_. But a quick consultation of these pages reveals that, while they deal with the night, they do so by emphasizing wakefulness. “Wakefulness,” Blanchot writes, “is without beginning or end,” and he continues: “To wake is neutral. I do not wake: someone wakes, the night wakes, always and incessantly, hollowing the night out [creusant la nuit] into the other night where there can be no question of sleeping” ( _Writing_ 48/82, translation modified [henceforth tr. mod.]).² Far from erecting or re-erecting a border between night and day via sleep, for Blanchot the very same state one associates with the day—waking—continues into the night, which would seem to fall in line with the openness of 24/7 that Crary seeks to combat. At the same time, one finds a theme here very familiar to readers of Blanchot, namely what he calls the other night. The term suggests a distinction—a border, in other words—between it and the first night, the night with which, Blanchot suggests, we are all familiar. But this is not the case: one arrives at the other night not by crossing a border from the first night, but by opening up the latter, “hollowing it out,” to recall Blanchot’s formulation. Yet if the first night is already open, this hollowing out must somehow mean opening the open—opening it onto itself, opening it beyond opening, as it were. To open the open would seem—as per the word to which Crary attaches the note on Blanchot—impossible, which distinguishes the other night even further from any understanding of openness as possibility.

Blanchot’s most sustained treatment of the other night comes in his 1955 book _The Space of Literature_. One of the difficulties of working with this theme is that it does not designate a series of attributes or characteristics, which would allow a reader to identify moments in a given text—say, by Mallarmé, Rilke, or Kafka, three of the writers on whom Blanchot spends the most time in _The Space of Literature_—as manifestations of it, places at which it is at work; Blanchot insists that it is not even purely nocturnal. Perhaps the best way to approach it is to begin with Blanchot’s oft-cited lines about the difference between the “first night” and the “other night” from the chapter “Outside, Night,” which begins with a discussion of one of the book’s most important themes, the impossibility of the work: “The work attracts the one who devotes himself to it toward the point at which it faces the test of impossibility. An experience that is properly nocturnal, that is the very experience of the night” (_Space_ 162/213, tr. mod.). The reference here is clearly to the other night, and in the lines that follow, Blanchot seeks to distinguish this night from what he calls “the first night.” “In the night, everything has disappeared. This is the first night. There, absence, silence, rest, and the night all approach. There … the one who sleeps doesn’t know it, the one who dies goes toward an encounter with true dying, there, the word ends and accomplishes itself in the silent depth that guarantees it as its meaning” (162/213, tr. mod.). This first night, the night of rest, is essentially the reverse of the day, and thus falls within the latter’s logic. The other night is certainly distinct from the first night, but what is key is the nature of this difference. Blanchot continues: “But when everything has disappeared in the night, ‘everything has disappeared’ appears. This is the other night. The night is the apparition of ‘everything has disappeared’” (162/213, tr. mod.).³ The other night is thus not a third category one would add to the day and the night, but rather a withdrawal or stepping back from the night, or better, the night’s withdrawal or stepping back from itself, a rendering inoperative of the presuppositions that make possible the establishment of the entire day-night framework. It is thus a space of an entirely different nature: where the first night is “welcoming,” enabling one to say that things happen “in the night,” the other night “does not welcome, does not open. In it, one is always outside” (162/213, tr. mod.). Yet the other night “does not close itself off either” (162/213, tr. mod.): its suspension is an opening, only not an opening “within” which something would come about.

This opening as suspension is what Blanchot means by the title of the book, not so much the space of literature as what a more literal translation would render literary space. I will argue, with
Blanchot, that if the first night’s opening is an opening as possibility (within which “anything is possible,” hence quite close to Crary’s structure of 24/7), the other night comprises an opening not so much beyond as prior to this opening, an opening of the opening that, to use Blanchot’s term, unworks 24/7’s structure of openness as possibility. One way to think this through would be to proceed through Blanchot’s text, engaging in a close reading of the way he formulates the other night. But given that what is at stake is literary space, it seems to me more in the spirit of Blanchot’s work to proceed via a reading of a literary text, one that time and again articulates the experience of the other night—one whose own space is constantly at issue for it. The text is Roberto Bolaño’s early novel *Monsieur Pain.*

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of Bolaño, a Chilean who spent most of his adult life in Spain, and who died from liver failure in 2003 at the age of 50. He achieved worldwide commercial success with a series of novels published in quick succession, from *Nazi Literature in the Americas* and *Distant Star* in 1996, to the posthumously published *2666* in 2004; he also achieved a great deal of critical acclaim, winning literary prizes such as the Premio Rómulo Gallegos and the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the adulation of his peers and of important publications: the *New York Times* famously called him “the most significant Latin American literary voice of his generation.” There is indeed a strain of Latin American literary studies that views him as wielding too much influence, acting as a “synecdochal figure,” in the words of Héctor Hoyos, who “has come to represent the entirety of contemporary Latin American literature” (7), thus marginalizing other equally deserving writers. To enter at length into the important debate over what has come to be known as the “Bolaño myth” would take me away from my main aims, but suffice it to say that my focus on Bolaño arises from a conviction that the novel I will be reading makes an urgent and essential contribution to thinking through the problems I have sketched in the opening pages of the essay.

I will begin with a brief description of the novel, given its relatively marginal place in Bolaño’s oeuvre. It takes place in Paris, in the spring of 1938, and deals with (and is narrated by) a man named Pierre Pain, a veteran of the Great War and, most significantly for the novel’s plot, a mesmerist, in other words a practitioner of the methods of “animal magnetism” outlined by the eighteenth-century Austrian physician Franz Mesmer. Having employed these methods to treat the ill, mostly within his small circle of friends, Pain acquires a reputation and is called on from time to time to treat those whose families have lost hope; he is largely a last resort, if an ingenious one. Early in the book, one of Pain’s friends, a certain Madame Reynaud, asks him to treat a friend’s husband, who is dying of unknown causes in a Parisian clinic; the man, it turns out, is none other than the great poet César Vallejo. And this leads to something else I should mention about the novel: its entire backdrop is fascism, not only the fascism that is just around the corner (the text begins with the words “Paris, 1938”), but the one already on the verge of victory—in other words, that of Franco’s nationalists in Spain: Vallejo, of course, was an ardent republican, and the reader learns, over the course of the novel, that the clinic in which he is being treated has been infiltrated by Spaniards loyal to Franco, or Frenchmen sympathetic to his cause, who seek nothing less than the death of their famous patient.

The reader will already have gleaned from this outline the presence of several nocturnal elements in the text. There is, first of all, the backdrop of fascism, often thought of as a nocturnal politics that appeals to emotions and to those darker elements within us, as opposed to the clear light of reason on which liberal democracy is said to depend. There is also the issue of secrecy: the Clinique Arago, in which Vallejo is a patient, is a mysterious place, full of dark corridors, passages that seem to lead nowhere, and so on, and in which it is difficult to obtain any clear information. There is finally Pain’s own practice of mesmerism, often referred to as an “occult” science that depends on forces that cannot, strictly speaking, be scientifically verified, and lumped together, justly or not, with the entire tradition of hermeticism, especially as it applies to medicine. But the novel’s nocturnal sensibility derives first and foremost from the fact that it seems to take place entirely at night. This is actually not the case: the narrative alternates between night and day as one would expect. Yet even those scenes that take place during the day are strangely darkened, deprived of the light that
would seem to be their right. This is in part due to the rain that forms a continuous backdrop to the novel (it is April in Paris, after all), which has the effect of driving the characters into the dark interiors—cafés, bars, cinemas—in which much of the narrative takes place, and the first scene I want to examine occurs in just such a space. (The novel, I should note, is divided into 21 scenes, varying in length from a few lines to several pages, separated from one another by gaps in the text.) The scene in question, the novel's sixth, stages an encounter between Pain and a pair of Spaniards whom he has already seen several times, but never met: in the first scene, Pain passes them in the darkened staircase of his apartment building, without knowing why they are there; in the third, he notices that they are following him through the streets of Paris (he ends up evading them); and when, in the fifth scene, he tries to pay a visit to Vallejo (he is rebuffed by a doctor who calls him a charlatan), he sees them again—they are doctors at the clinic in which Vallejo is being treated. The scene in question begins with Pain arriving at a café on the boulevard St-Michel at 10 p.m., in response to an invitation from the Spaniards (they are referred to thus throughout the novel; the name of only one of them is revealed near the end of the book). The scene is dominated by the play of light and dark: while the lighting in the restaurant is “in no way deficient or abnormal,” Pain has the impression of “entering a dark cinema, the film already underway, preceded by the waiter, who for the occasion had been transformed into an usher guiding me to my seat. The bat, I thought. The path that links the man who serves and the man who sees in the dark” (20/38, tr. mod.). The waiter leads him to a table at which the Spaniards are seated, and the conversation is enigmatic from the beginning: one of the Spaniards tells Pain about a game they have invented, based on guessing the names of French waiters, in which the only possible outcome is that they both win or both lose (“Maybe our system is too perfect,”” [22/41] one of them confesses); the same Spaniard, referred to by Pain as “the dark one” (though he reflects that they are, in fact, both dark), takes a pair of pills “from a little nickel-plated box,” which “transformed the light striking it into curious reflected figures”—Pain has never seen anything like it and is “relieved when he put it back into the inside pocket of his jacket” (23/41–42). Finally, they get to the point, which is that they want him to forget all about Vallejo, in the interest of what one of them refers to as “the common good” (24/42), upon which the other immediately expounds through a bizarre list of terms: “Harmony … Balance … The stability of the spheres … The tunnels filled again … Smiles …” (24/42). Pain, dismissing what he views as a clumsy characterization of mesmerism, presses them for information, but instead of responding, they set an envelope containing two thousand francs on the table; flustered, he reflects that the money is useless (given that he has already been prohibited from seeing Vallejo), and murmurs: “This is the strangest bribe I’ve ever heard of” (25/44). Far from dwelling on the bribe, however, the narrative turns back to the Spaniards, who are now in a festive mood: one of them announces his intent to call the waiter “and order another bottle of wine. The night is still young [La noche es joven todavía],” to which the other responds: “The night is always young [La noche es joven siempre]” (25/44).

The scene thus presents several more “nocturnal” elements, from its cinematic setting, through its emphasis on ludic elements, to the uncanny inseparability of the Spaniards. But I want to focus on the disagreement with which the scene ends, which concerns the very nature of the night. It appears to be the most straightforward disagreement possible, given the simple difference between the adjectives applied to the noun: still or todavía suggests an unchanging state of affairs, all the while anticipating an impending transformation; always or siempre, on the other hand, implies that the state of affairs in question will remain the same forever. But what is most interesting about these terms in Spanish is the way they at times coincide: siempre means always, but it can also (like the French toujours) mean still, as in the statement siempre estás aquí, which means both “you’re always here” and “you’re still here,” the difference only discernable from context. The second Spaniard’s disagreement with the first is therefore also an agreement, a simultaneous negation and affirmation of his friend’s claim. This is fitting, because their disagreement depends on a prior agreement, that the term “young” can be applied to the night; they agree, in other words, to attribute a certain life to the night: the latter, they imply,
is a living, breathing entity, one that, as such, will at some point grow old and die. Or rather, can grow old and die, but won’t: by replacing (and at the same time affirming) the first Spaniard’s *todavía* with *siempre*, the second Spaniard suggests that the night is a living entity that will somehow not die, that it has arrested the process of aging, all the while remaining alive. This would seem to hew very closely to the idea, often associated with fascism, of eternal youth or constant rejuvenation, not of a particular individual but of the life of a nation: people may indeed grow old and die, but the nation constantly regenerates itself—indeed, its survival depends on its ability to continuously and ceaselessly replenish its youth. Yet if the novel’s political gesture does not seem at all antiquated—if it seems, on the contrary, decidedly actual (to use a word of exceeding importance for the narrative)—it is because of a structure of openness that it bestows on the night: always or *siempre* leaves still or *todavía* intact but takes away its endpoint; its youth will not morph into maturity and old age but is, on the contrary, limitless, opening onto infinite and unceasing possibility. In the night, the second Spaniard implies, anything can happen—such is its life, and the proof is that the Spaniards, though, of course, they tell Pain that they would like him to “forget everything” (23/42, tr. mod.), leave the decisions to him: it is he who decides to accept the bribe, it is he who, against his better judgment, remains with the Spaniards late into the night, and it is the committed vegetarian Pain who eats a “juicy Argentinean steak” (27/46) in their company: as he states in a telephone call (which quickly becomes a long confession) to his former mentor, a certain Monsieur Rivette, that comprises the entirety of the next scene, “I wasn’t being forced [‘*Y no fue contra mi voluntad*’]” (27/46)—he is free to do as he chooses, and he chooses to do exactly what the Spaniards want him to do. If this is the case, it is because there is not really any moment of decision—the narrative proceeds not as a series of rational decisions, but as a pure movement, a flow of sorts, not unlike life itself, which, after all, has no reason for being but simply insists, pushing forward, surviving or living on; its movement is quite simply the natural order of things, so that to try to reason with it, to pose it questions and expect any sort of accounting, is to enter into senselessness or, at the very least, to risk ridicule: what is at stake is quite simply the pure, open movement of the life of the night.

This night has much in common with that of Cray’s 24/7, which passes along without ever really aging (gone, after all, is the border between night and day that would mark its “death”), presenting an entirely open structure marked by endless possibility. The place at which this life of the night is most evident in the novel is in the treatment of Vallejo—in other words, precisely where a life is at stake. During Pain’s first visit to the clinic, as he stands in the corridor in the company of Georgette Vallejo and Madame Reynaud, a group of doctors approaches; from the middle of the group emerges a certain Doctor Lemière (an eminent physician who has arrived at the clinic with the express aim of treating Vallejo, and hence the only doctor, because he comes from without, who may not be in on the plot against the poet) to greet Madame Vallejo, to whom he says: “‘A pleasure to meet you. I have just seen your husband. All his organs are in perfect working order! I can’t see what’s wrong with the man’” (16/32). The problem with Vallejo, in other words, is that there is no problem: everything is in perfect working order, and Vallejo should be fine—he just isn’t; Lemière eventually goes so far as to say of the organs in question: “‘Let’s hope we find one that is diseased! I can see that this man is dying, but I don’t know what from’” (38/59). Since Vallejo’s illness leads back to no cause, it also gives no possibility for intervention, for how to intervene when there is no blockage whatsoever—how to resist, in other words, when everything is working smoothly, when all of the channels are open? Vallejo’s illness simply comes about, without any reason—it is just there. In such a situation, one might conclude that if there is nothing wrong with the organs in question, they have simply run their course and are wearing out—perhaps the problem with Vallejo’s organs is simply that they are old. To this supposition, the text offers a response in the original that the translation cannot: where in English Doctor Lemière’s pronouncement reads, “All his organs are in perfect working order!,” the original, in fact, has: *¡Todos los órganos están nuevos!*—all of the organs are new. Again, what is at stake is what the novel puts forth as the youth of life: not only is everything working fine, it is better than fine, there is a youth that pulsates in these organs, a life that
constantly regenerates itself by way of them, and that somehow, not through any blockage but as part of its absolutely free and open unfolding, leads directly to death.

Pain is no less perplexed than Doctor Lemière, which is logical, given that, like much of conventional medicine, mesmerism is dominated by the idea that restoring health to an ill patient occurs through the opening of channels, the removal of blockages. This is probably why his initial approach, not only to treating Vallejo, but also to understanding his own predicament and the situation unfolding around him, is to speak the language of openness. During his phone call with his former mentor, for instance, he puts forth several (often mutually contradictory) possible reasons for which he may have accepted the Spaniards’ bribe—he is short of cash, it didn’t make any difference, etc.—before finally admitting (it is likely that he realizes only at this moment) that he took the money “so as not to block … the passage” (30/49)—he accepted the bribe to keep open a possibility that otherwise would have been closed off: perhaps he imagines that the best way to keep (or regain) access to Vallejo is to play the Spaniards’ game, rather than openly contesting them and thereby remaining the object of their focus. He conceives of the problem at hand, in other words, as a closure, and continues to do so the one and only time he treats Vallejo: sitting at the head of the poet’s bed, Pain holds his hand a few inches above his patient’s head and enters a trancelike state; the aim is literally to pull Vallejo’s illness out of his body—in other words, to open a blockage, and indeed, at some point during the treatment, the poet’s hiccups stop for the first time in a long while. Since a hiccup consists in part of a momentary closure of the diaphragm, Pain has indeed succeeded in creating an opening, seemingly effecting an improvement in the condition of the patient. Yet he is soon consumed by doubt, unsure as to whether he is taking the right approach; little by little, he begins to conceive of the problem differently. The turning point in his understanding, to my mind, occurs the next day, while he eats a late breakfast in a café he frequents. As he reads a newspaper, the owner of the café, Raoul, inquires about the news; Pain responds that it concerns Spain, “the bombing raids, the shelling, and the new weapons that we hadn’t known in the Great War” (57/81). Raoul puts the blame on the Germans (who are “testing out their arsenal” [57/81] in Spain), and when someone disagrees, several of the patrons join what becomes a free-flowing conversation about the seemingly inevitable war, much of it concerned with the German weaponry that threatens to render humans superfluous. When a blind patron jokes that he is lucky to have never seen a war, Pain rejoins the conversation, saying:

“You can count yourself lucky in that respect, Jean-Luc. The scenery of war is … Dantesque. No: miserable … squalid … The problem is that if a war broke out, blindness would only spare you from active service, not from all the other disasters that wars inevitably bring in their wake. However wretched your life is, war can make it worse, and I’m speaking for all of us, not just you.” (58/82–83)

What Pain speaks of, invoking Dante and a generalized wretchedness, is a kind of hell, and this may be what leads to a very enigmatic statement he ends up making. As the conversation continues, someone invokes Pain’s participation in the Great War, which causes him to reflect, to himself, on a near-death experience he had while a soldier, when his lungs were scorched at Verdun. After the war, “perhaps as a reaction against the society that had imperturbably sent me forth to die” (59/84), he gives up on a career, and turns instead to the occult sciences; it is perhaps his memory of this trajectory that leads him to ask Raoul, seemingly out of the blue: “Do you know what Mesmer’s teacher was called?” (59/85). When neither Raoul nor anyone else is able to answer, Pain finally responds: “Hell … He was the first to try to cure illnesses by means of animal magnetism. That was his name: Hell [Y Hell en inglés quiere decir inferierno]. […] Hell was one of Mesmer’s teachers [Uno de los maestros de Mesmer se llamaba Infierno], what do you make of that?” (60/85). Pain is able to shift seamlessly from the horrors of war to mesmerism, speaking of both in the same language, because what they have in common is a certain understanding of openness, that of proceeding unproblematically through a channel: the “logic” of the leadup to the war, as Raoul and the café patrons describe it, is not a logic at all, only a ceaseless accumulation, whereby one technological advance begets another—an inexorable and deadly progression reminiscent of the movement of life
I discussed earlier, leading directly to death, and likewise resistant to criticism given that it is in no way illogical: it proceeds, on the contrary, according to the most straightforward logic of openness. As with the statements of the Spaniards earlier, the novel here again suggests that the logic of unbridled openness constitutes a hellish, deathly logic—a logic, to continue with the distinctly English wordplay of several of the novel’s names, of pure pain.  

Pain’s intervention ends the debate about the war, and at this point one of the café’s patrons approaches his table. The man, who introduces himself as Jules Sautreau, has read widely in the field of animal magnetism (a term he uses interchangeably with “vital force”), and he engages Pain in a conversation about some of the key works of mesmerism. The conversation spans several pages of the novel, and takes on the characteristics of a list, as Sautreau moves from one title to another (La force vitale, L’âme humaine, Mesmer …). In a way the list fits perfectly within the framework of accumulation or progression, each title opening onto another or others, an agglomeration that occurs through a natural process of growth. As is so often the case with Bolaño’s lists, however, a double movement is at work—something is taking place besides simple accumulation. The first index of this is that, as the conversation progresses, Pain’s commitment to mesmerism seems to wane, as he treats it with increasing skepticism, referring to it as “a kind of humanism, not a science” (62/87) and even as a “malignant illusion” (63/89), noting that after Mesmer’s death, “his theories were definitively condemned” (63/89). This is the point in the novel at which Pain seems most like a charlatan, casting doubt on his own practice. But it is also the point at which he begins to imagine a strategy different from that of removing blockages and opening passages, and it is a blockage afforded to him by mesmerism that allows him to do so. Near the end of the conversation, he states: “For me, mesmerism is like a medieval painting. Beautiful and useless. Timeless [Extemporánea]. Trapped [Atrapada]”; when Sautreau interrogates him on this final word (by simply repeating it in the form of a question), he responds “I don’t know why I said it … Trapped … A trapped idea … I suppose I meant trapped in time.” Sautreau pushes him: “Or trapped by someone,” to which Pain responds, ending the conversation: “By Father Hell?” (63/89–90). This ending is nothing if not enigmatic (especially given that Pain is soon walking in the rain toward the clinic, where he will again seek to employ Mesmer’s techniques to treat Vallejo); yet if the prevailing tone is one of resignation, this resignation expresses (if I can put it this way) a certain force vitale, the best manifestation of which is the repetition of the word “trapped.” The word appears no fewer than six times in just a few lines, turning what had been a free-flowing conversation into something of an echo chamber—in other words, effecting the very entrapment to which the word refers. I have argued throughout the essay that the novel operates within a general framework of openness, and that Pain’s plight is that he buys into this framework and is thus paradoxically trapped in openness. Hence what the narrative does at this point is to turn entrapment against itself: confronting it against itself in a game of mirrors, causing it to stutter and to echo itself, the narrative does not so much block the open passage in which it had unfolded (it continues, after all), but rather suspends it, choosing neither opening nor closing but rather stepping back from the choice, seemingly laying itself bare. Where before, everything was open, this is the point at which (to paraphrase Blanchot) “everything is open” opens onto itself: the unworking or inoperativity of openness, openness as its own suspension.

This openness as suspension would seem to come very close to the conception of openness put forth by Giorgio Agamben. In The Open, Agamben seeks to think the relationship between man and animal by bringing together two motifs from Heidegger: the animal’s poverty in world and profound boredom as an essential attunement of the human. Agamben argues, contra Heidegger, against any radical separation of the two: the human open is “nothing but a grasping of the animal not-open,” and comes about when “[m]an suspends [sospende] his animality and, in this way, opens a ‘free and empty’ [libera e vuota] zone in which life is captured and abandoned in a zone of exception” (79). If the human has historically sought to dominate or master its own animality, this openness makes another approach possible, whereby man “appropriates his own concealedness, his own animality, which neither remains hidden nor is made an object of mastery, but is thought as such, as pure
abandonment” (80); this would entail not a dialectical surpassing of the animal by the human, but rather “the reciprocal suspension of the two terms [reciproca sospensione dei due termini]” (83), in other words what he calls, a few pages on, “the suspension of the suspension”:

To render inoperative [inoperosa] the machine that governs our conception of man will therefore mean no longer to seek new—more effective or more authentic—articulations, but rather to show the central emptiness, the hiatus [il vuoto centrale, lo iato] that—within man—separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness [in questo vuoto]: the suspension of the suspension [sospensione della sospensione], Shabbat of both animal and man. (92)

While the language here is indeed similar to what I referred to above as openness as its own suspension, Agamben’s conception of openness is, in fact, radically different from the openness I have sought to read in both Bolaño and Blanchot, because it is articulated entirely through a language of emptiness: Agamben’s open, as he puts it time and again, comprises an emptiness, an absence, or a gap, a space perfectly suited to the framework of possibility within which he works.20 This openness is total, a pure emptiness, and this is what separates it from Blanchot’s understanding, in which openness is marked by an essential impurity,21 never precisely empty because something has always begun to murmur within it: if, for Blanchot, openness is not a space of pure possibility or potentiality, it is because openness always precedes itself,22 is always its own insistence—openness has already begun to sound. It is this other openness, this openness before openness, that is at work in Monsieur Pain, and that is unsurprisingly conveyed by a sound, one that is nothing if not impure: the hiccup.

Many prominent theorists have dealt with the hiccup in recent studies. In *The Parallax View*, Slavoj Žižek comments on the scene from Chaplin’s *City Lights* in which the tramp swallows a whistle, and then gets an attack of the hiccups, arguing that the comical sound that ensues confronts the tramp with an “excess”: “a spectral sound emanating from within my body, sound as an autonomous ‘organ without a body,’ located in the very heart of my body and at the same time uncontrollable” (119). In *A Voice and Nothing More*, Mladen Dolar reflects on philosophy’s most celebrated case of hiccups, that of Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium*, interpreting it as an “unintelligible voice, for which one can only propose the formula: it means that it means” (25), and comparing it to Lévi-Strauss’s discussion of the Polynesian mana, a “pre-cultural, non-cultural voice” that “can be seen as the zero-point of signification, the incidence of meaning, itself not meaning anything, the point around which other—meaningful—voices can be ordered, as if the hiccups stood at the very focus of the structure” (26). Finally, Agamben, in his recent *What Is Philosophy?*, mentions hiccups in a discussion of Aristotle’s distinction between the confused voice, which comprises both “the unwritable voice of animals” and “that part of the human voice that cannot be written, ‘such as laughter, whistling, or hiccup[s],’” and the articulated voice, which can be “transcribed and comprehended—that is, captured—by means of letters” (19).23 What these very different theorizations have in common is that each of them posits the hiccup as an index of something else, a manifestation of an excess or a beyond (the objet a, signification’s zero point, voice’s possibility); the hiccups in Bolaño’s novel are quite different, doing not more than these other hiccups, but less. I said “in Bolaño’s novel,” and hiccups arise often enough in the text; their first appearance is in the second scene, when Madame Reynaud asks Pain to treat Vallejo: Pain notes that he “ordered a glass of mint cordial before asking what illness was afflicting Monsieur …” (3/17, tr. mod.), at which point his friend cuts him off: “Vallejo,’ said Madame Reynaud, adding, with equal concision, ‘Hiccups’” (3/17). Reynaud, in other words, posits the hiccups not as a symptom, but as the very illness from which the poet is suffering, an illness whose gravity she underscores by adding that in certain cases “hiccups can be fatal” (4/18). The hiccup is a deadly sign, but only of itself, symptom and illness in a single gesture, coming together in a topography both simple and complex. Pain reflects on this the one and only time he treats Vallejo.

In the stillness of the room all that could be heard was his hiccup. I know I’ll never be able to describe Vallejo’s face, at least not as I saw it then, the only time we ever met; but the hiccup, the nature of this hiccup that
enveloped everything as soon as you listened carefully, that is, as soon as you really listened, eluded every description, and yet was at the same time accessible to everyone [a la medida de cualquiera], like a sonic ectoplasm or like a Surrealist found object. (40–41/62, tr. mod., emphasis in original)

If Pain will never be able to describe Vallejo’s face, one assumes that it is because of one or several obstacles that get in his way: the room is dark, he has entered a trancelike state, he stares at the poet’s face for too long, and so on. The difficulty in describing the hiccups (or rather, its nature, to which one gains access only upon really listening, as though an “other” listening were at stake) is different, arising because there are no obstacles: it is too accessible, too “custom made” for or “in proportion to” the listener (to translate the expression a la medida more directly), not so much a sound as the very fact of listening. Hence the comparison to the found object: an everyday object exhibited in a gallery remains the object that it was, all the while suspending its function, estranging itself from itself. The peculiarity of this suspension, however, becomes evident in the other analogy. The OED defines an ectoplasm as a “viscous substance which is supposed to emanate from the body of a spiritualistic medium,” most often during a séance (the term gained currency in certain “magical” quarters in the early part of the twentieth century), and which thereby, according to the Oxford Dictionaries definition, “forms the material for the manifestation of spirits.” An ectoplasm (if such a thing were to exist), to allow spirits to appear, somehow would have to suspend the normal space of visibility. Pain, however, refers not to a visual but to a sonic ectoplasm, which, according to the logic just described, would suspend normal audibility to allow one to hear sounds that usually remain inaudible. Yet such a suspension of sound, far from an absence or emptiness (in the form, say, of total or pure silence), would be just that—a sound; a suspension of audibility, far from opening an empty space to render possible new sounds, would rather form the insistence of something like sound itself.

From a logical standpoint, this comes very close to what Blanchot theorizes as the “murmur” inherent to literary space; if Bolaño has a literary precursor in this regard, it is Kafka, specifically the humming noise that the creature hears toward the end of “The Burrow,” which has clearly been there all along.24 A murmur or hum, however, would seem much closer to the sound of sound’s suspension than a hiccups; Bolaño gives the reader a sense of why he insists on this term in the paragraph following the one on which I have just commented, which begins with Pain commenting on the words he has just uttered:

I said “the nature of the hiccups” and perhaps one of its particularities, this was my impression, was to contain its origin in itself. We all know that the hiccups is a muscular contraction, a convulsive movement of the diaphragm that produces interrupted and violent breathing, intermittently causing a characteristic sound; Vallejo’s hiccups, however, seemed to be completely autonomous, foreign to the body of my patient, as if the hiccups were afflicted with him rather than the other way around. (41/62–63, tr. mod.)

That the hiccups would contain its origin within itself is less strange than it sounds, and is linked to the textbook definition with which Pain follows this claim: if a hiccups is indeed an “interrupted and violent breathing,” the point is that it is just this, breathing; it is not distinct from the breathing that it interrupts, but is rather the movement by which breathing interrupts itself, a repetitive self-suspension25; it momentarily closes off breathing, but its closure is at once an opening (it is “a quick, inspiratory movement,” per the OED), an opening that does not so much produce a sound as comprise it—opening and sound are one.

But what is most important about this passage is the mention of autonomy, because it brings up the question of where exactly to locate the hiccup. If the hiccups is “foreign to the body of my patient,” it is because the text’s hiccups cannot be reduced to content, is not this or that hiccups “within” the text; the hiccups precedes Vallejo, indeed precedes all of its occurrences within the narrative, because it is not really “in the text,” but is the text: narrative and hiccups are one, the latter constitutes the former (the hiccups that appear in the text, in this regard, are in a sense signs of themselves). This is the case right from the beginning: the hiccups comprises the essential moment of the first scene, even before its first mention in the second. The novel begins with Pain leaving his
apartment in the early afternoon, on his way to the meeting with Madame Reynaud at which he will agree to treat Vallejo. Descending the stairs, he comes across the pair of men whom he will later refer to as the Spaniards. The scene, while it takes place in the middle of the day, is decidedly nocturnal: Pain describes “the semi-darkness that generally prevails in stairwells” (1/15, tr. mod.) and his own “quiet way of moving” (1/15), which leads the Spaniards not to notice his presence until he is upon them, trying to pass. Rather than stepping aside, they simply turn and look at him very slowly, which leads him to think momentarily that they are policemen, for “only policemen have preserved that way of looking, the inheritance of hunters and dark woods” (1–2/16, tr. mod.): not only is this diurnal scene cloaked in darkness, it is a natural and, indeed, primitive darkness, the inheritance of a gloomy forest. “Primitive” is apt here, for when Pain finally passes and reaches the landing, he turns to look back at the Spaniards, who have not moved: they are still there, “faintly illuminated by a globe suspended over the landing above them,” holding the same position as though “time had stopped” (2/16)—as though a primordial darkness had deferred the dawn, thus putting an end to the normal cycle of day and night. The primordialness of this darkness suggests that nothing precedes it, anticipating Pain’s observation that Vallejo’s hiccup contains its origin in itself; it also recalls Blanchot’s comments on the structure of anteriority inherent to any great literary text: “the presence of Midnight, the anterior [l’en deçà], that from which nothing ever begins, the empty depth of the unworking of being” (43/46, tr. mod.). But the moment at which the primordial truly comes to the fore, and at which this opening scene enters into conversation with Blanchot’s night, is its final sentence, in which, paradoxically, Pain leaves the dark staircase and emerges into the light of day: “When I reached the street the rain made me forget this incident” (2/16, tr. mod.). A simple passage, from the enclosure of the staircase to the openness of the outside, but at the same time there is no passage at all: Pain passes from semi-darkness not into the bright light of midday, but into semi-darkness—the dark and gloom of the ever-present rain; he at once enters a new space and remains in the space from which he departs, leaving the dark enclosure behind by bringing it with him into the open, and this non-passage within the text is at the same time the space of the text itself. The eerie quality of this first scene arises in part from the fact that its narration is almost too detailed: Pain speaks of the hats the Spaniards are wearing, the awkwardness of their poses, even the width of the staircase; yet as he steps through the door, “the rain made me forget this incident”—in a single short sentence, he passes from the most intricate details to a seeming void, an imbalance reflected in the awkward wording of the phrase. He forgets all too quickly, yet this should not lead one to think that this is a “false forgetting,” that Pain is lying or covering something up—on the contrary, it recalls Blanchot’s claim that the other night “is forgetting that forgets itself, which is, at the heart of forgetting, remembering without rest” (Space 163/214, tr. mod.): if forgetting is usually thought of as a clearing or emptiness, by which one leaves old thoughts behind so that new ones can arise, this “forgetting of forgetting” happens such that the forgotten details pass over the threshold forgetting seeks to build without its being aware, indeed, precisely because it is not aware—because, as per the nature of forgetting, it forgets that it forgets. The forgotten continues to murmur beyond forgetting, constituting not a form of memory, but the impossible insistence of what has been irrevocably lost.

This opening is thus nothing if not impure, and Pain progressively learns to seek out precisely this form of opening, not by clearing channels and removing blockages, but by locating in the blockages themselves the index of opening’s impurity. Immediately after his “trapped” discussion with Sautreau, he returns to the clinic for his second treatment of Vallejo, but is denied entry by the nurse at the reception desk, not for any reason in particular—she simply tells him: “‘Come back another day’” (65/92). He leaves, and sets up camp in the window of a café across the street, planning to intercept Madame Vallejo to tell her what has happened as soon as she departs the clinic; when she fails to appear, he leaves the café and hails a cab, but is pushed away as he opens the door by a man who calls him a “Mouthy Jew” (68/95) and ends up taking the taxi; soon he is in another café, attempting to telephone Madame Reynaud, with no luck. Pain, in other words, finds his path blocked time and again, yet these very blockages form the path to the table he ends up sharing with three print shop employees; though he has just met them, it seems “natural to stay with them” (69/96, tr. mod.) when the café closes.
The blockages soon turn into a series of labyrinthine openings: the group moves from bar to bar, eventually entering a building through “a series of doors promptly opened by someone who remained hidden” (70/97), into what turns out to be a semi-clandestine gaming house, where he watches a group of gamblers play a game he does not recognize; when he finally decides to leave, the doorman, after initially hesitating, leads him through “an endless succession of doors” (72/100) to a back entrance through which he passes, yet he soon realizes that he has not left at all: he is “not in an alley but a kind of industrial warehouse, enormous and ancient, with a gap in the roof through which the stars were visible” (72/100, tr. mod.); he searches the walls of the warehouse in the darkness, but is incapable of finding any exit. Lighting a match, he realizes that the space is full of junk—tools, rusty contraptions, discarded objects of every sort; coming across what he thinks might be an old bathtub, he steps inside, lies down, and falls asleep, but he is soon woken by what he calls “the sound”: “Barely a drop of water, but in the center of my consciousness” (74/102). He lies waiting, fearlessly, according to his own testimony, and soon “The noise repeated itself, an imperfect duplicate” (74/102); it seems to be creeping along one of the warehouse walls; soon, it leaves the wall, and Pain realizes that it is moving in his direction; he tries to determine the trajectory it will take to reach him, calculating that, while any route is “possible,” its arrival is “inevitable” (74–75/103, tr. mod.). The noise, however, begins to vacillate; Pain hears “a rustle of clothing, then silence” (75/104). At this point he finally gives in to the temptation to light a match, but he sees nothing: whoever is making the sound is “outside of my field of vision” (76/104). His presence is certain, however: “Although I didn’t see him I knew he was there. I heard his hiccup. In all clarity. Spasmodic, annoying” (76/104).

Eerie as the closed space of the warehouse, and the approaching hiccup, may seem, they belong, in essence, to the first night: Pain eventually determines that the hiccup is “not natural but simulated” (76/104), that someone is simply imitating Vallejo; as for the warehouse, it only seems closed: shortly after the noise stops moving toward him, he falls asleep, and when he wakes, with the sun high in the sky, he simply walks over to an open door that he had not noticed in the darkness, and leaves. Simulated though it may be, this hiccup is a sign that the night is opening onto the other night, again at the level of the narrative. The scene in the warehouse goes on for several pages, during which the sound in question is variously described as a sound, a drop, a rustling, and even a silence; he goes so far as to speak of a lucidity that seems to emanate from the sound. It is only at the end of the scene that he employs the word hiccup, despite the fact that the stranger in the warehouse has clearly been hiccupping the whole time. It may be that Pain only realizes belatedly that the sound is a hiccup, but he gives no indication of this: in his narration, the sound is almost anything but a hiccup, and then suddenly it is just that, a hiccup, yet it has not changed—it has rather become the sound that it already was. Perhaps the intruder’s hiccup is feigned because the real hiccup is the one that occurs not in but as the text: as with the scene in the staircase, the narrative passes into a different space by not passing beyond the one it departs; this impure and, indeed, noisy openness is the very means by which the narrative “spasmodically” and perhaps even “annoyingly” proceeds.

A hiccup, I argued above, is not separate from the breathing it interrupts, and given that it works at the level of the narrative of *Monsieur Pain*, it is no exaggeration to say that it is the breathing of this novel—a living opening, which brings me back to the statements of the Spaniards regarding the life of the night. It is indeed possible to read these statements—the night is still young, the night is always young—in the way I did above, as an affirmation of the night of 24/7, the infinite possibilities afforded by the night’s openness and its unceasing rejuvenation. But to stop there would be to miss something essential about the life, and the opening, that they articulate. I observed earlier that *la noche es joven siempre* both corrects and affirms *la noche es joven todavía*, implying a passage of time that nonetheless does not age, that ceaselessly puts off its ending, much like the night of Crary’s 24/7. But this night opens onto another night: *la noche es joven siempre* corrects the first statement, but it simultaneously—the first four words are the same, and the last word is the same in its very difference—repeats it, moving beyond it or leaving it behind by bringing it along, hence fitting perfectly within
the logic of the hiccup that I have been describing, and also necessitating a precision. I have referred
time and again to “the hiccup,” yet there is almost never a single hiccup, only hiccups; a hiccup is
plural in its very nature, presupposing others that preceded it and anticipating those that will follow.
This plurality is inherent to the statements of the Spaniards: the second statement, repeating the first
almost verbatim, returns to it; yet the first, anticipating its “correction” in the second’s repetition,
pushes along toward it; this second statement again harks back to the first… Each breath of this life
of the night is thus always already modified by the other (“still” always infecting “always” with its
impending ending, “always” always deferring this ending), which means that each constantly calls
into question the other’s solidity: the movement is one of incompleteness, with each statement
ceaselessly undone, lessened, impoverished by the other. Each opened—not an opening within
which possibility arises, but an opening preceding this opening, an opening that opens itself, that
is its own unworking, its own subtraction. An opening that ceaselessly murmurs the impoverishment
of the life of the night.

Notes

1. This is an issue many recent writers have taken up via the concept of convenience. In his recent New York Times article “The Tyranny of Convenience,” for instance, Tim Wu writes: “In the developed nations of the 21st century, convenience—that is, more efficient and easier ways of doing personal tasks—has emerged as perhaps the most powerful force shaping our individual lives and our economies”; while he extols the fact that convenience makes life “less arduous, especially for those most vulnerable to life’s drudgeries,” he nonetheless calls the reader’s attention to its “dark side”: “With its promise of smooth, effortless efficiency, it threatens to erase the sort of struggles and challenges that help give meaning to life. Created to free us, it can become a constraint on what we are willing to do, and thus in a subtle way it can enslave us.”

2. For texts by Blanchot and Bolaño, I will give page references to the translation and then to the original, separated by a forward slash.

3. All emphases, for this and subsequent quotations, are in the original.

4. Of course, what is at stake here is not only an understanding of Blanchot but, more generally, an understanding of literature as that which thinks in and of itself, rather than simply providing food for thought—an understanding of literature, to paraphrase Anna Kornbluh, as thought rather than index, creation rather than document, which it paradoxically attains through what Kornbluh calls its “otherworldliness” (400).

5. A novel, as befits Bolaño, with an enigmatic history. Bolaño notes in a short preface that he originally wrote it in early 1980s, under the title Anna Kornbluh by a forward slash. See Mario Vargas Llosa’s success on a literary

6. Allow me to give just one example from the long list of writers who revered him, the Argentine author Rodrigo Fresán, who in an obituary for Bolaño, noted that “in a recent congress on new Latin American literature in Seville it was very clear that a whole generation considered him as its totem, and as the best possible example to follow” (my translation). See Fresán, “Roberto Bolaño (1953–2003).”

7. See Larry Rohter, “Harvesting Fragments From a Chilean Master.”

8. This leads Hoyos, in his important book Beyond Bolaño, to put forth several possible reasons for which other Latin American writers “do not enjoy the massive appeal of their Chilean counterpart” (18), arguing that “Bolaño’s writing offers readers everywhere a comfortable choice by being both residual of the Cold War imagination and cognizant of a budding multipolarity” (19), that it is “recognizable as Latin American” but at the same time “challenges the self-evidence of Latin American exceptionalism” (19), and that it puts forth a “distinctive brand of globalization” (20) that appeals to readers, and asking whether “Bolaño’s untimely death facilitated his global reception, not only for aural reasons—the allure of a lost genius—but because he could thus be unrooted from any pre-existing, if relatively modest, critical tradition” (207). What these compelling hypotheses have in common is that they are all sociopolitical rather than literary, or at best literary only in a secondary manner—it is as though Hoyos felt that he had to choose. (To my mind, this arises at least in part from the representational framework within which he works: his “objects of study,” as he puts it, are “literary representations of the world” [1]; to set things up in this manner is to exclude from the outset the possibility of a literary work inhabiting both sides of this seeming gap.) The risk of addressing Bolaño’s success on a literary
terrain is that of falling into the “genius” argument, the idea that Bolaño had more success simply because his writing was better. But it seems to me that another approach is possible, one that Hoyos himself suggests when, addressing Bolaño’s “contemporaneity” (196), he argues that the novelist “speaks to the times in interesting
ways” (195): it is precisely this voice, at once literary and sociopolitical, that this essay seeks to locate in Bolaño, employing the resources of what Blanchot calls literary space.

9. For an essay that is at once a contribution to and a good overview of this debate, see Sarah Pollack’s “After Bolaño.” Like Hoyos, Pollack employs the figure of the synecdoche (what she calls “the synecdoche of literary commodification” [660]), arguing that Bolaño’s novels “operate as a prism … through which other works of Latin American narrative are read, selected, appreciated, and brought to readers in the United States” (661).

10. This marginal place goes some way toward explaining the near absence of critical attention paid to it. (One exception is Ursula K. Le Guin, who in a brief review focuses on what she calls the novel’s “tortuous method of approaching the unspeakable”: this allows it, she argues, to reveal “the face of evil without glamorizing it, as popular literature and film so often do. By indirection it avoids collusion.”) If scholars have paid little attention to Monsieur Pain, however, they have dealt with the theme of openness in other works by Bolaño. One example is Eli Jelly-Schapiro, who argues that the theme of rupture, ever-present in Bolaño, should be understood “not as a wall that blocks off the past and the world but as an opening that brings deeper histories into view” (78).

11. My one disagreement with Jelly-Schapiro concerns the way he posits this opening through a language of revelation and illumination, claiming, for instance, that Bolaño’s project is “to reveal what is hidden” and to “expose the mechanisms through which the blank spots in our vision are formed and normalized” (88), and locating in the darkness that runs through this project “the beginning of illumination” (91). One of the aims of this essay is to argue that openness in Bolaño works according to an entirely different logic.

12. The ellipses are Bolaño’s. He uses them often in Monsieur Pain; for this reason, so as to avoid confusion, I will place my own ellipses (to indicate words omitted from quotations) in square parentheses. All other ellipses are in the original texts.

13. At one point late in the novel, Pain follows one of the Spaniards into a cinema and finds himself seated beside a former colleague who is now living in Spain, working on the side of the nationalists; the name of the film that is playing, in which yet another former colleague appears, is L’actualité.

14. It is interesting in this regard that mesmerism, or animal magnetism, is essentially a theory of fluids. Mesmer writes of his theory that it is based on “the known principles of universal attraction,” whereby the planets “exercise a direct action on the constitutive parts of living bodies, particularly on the nervous system, by means of a fluid that penetrates all” (Mesmer, 12, my translation, emphasis in original).

15. One of the main indices of the ever-growing tendency to understand life through the prism of possibility is the current attempt not simply to prolong life, but to completely overcome death, which is conceived by modern science, in the words of Yuval Noah Harari, as “a technical problem that we can and should solve” (25). Harari’s work is probably the best-known treatment of this topic (see especially the section of Homo Deus entitled “The Last Days of Death,” 24–34), but the issue is being dealt with everywhere—see, for instance, Meghan O’Gieblyn’s “Ghost in the Cloud,” Tara Horn’s “The Men Who Want to Live Forever,”; Ted Friend’s “Silicon Valley’s Quest to Live Forever.” Key to the arguments of many of the proponents of “solving” death is their matter-of-fact quality, as though any attempts to think about this issue differently—to question the desire to live forever—were simply nonsensical.

16. This is not to suggest that mesmerism and conventional medicine are identical: the former posits, after all, that opening the channels in question will allow the forces of the universe to flow through the patient in a harmonious manner. Of course—and in this regard mesmerism has much in common with other “hermetic” branches of medicine, such as that of Paracelsus—this idea is not so different, in its formal aspect, from much of the contemporary discourse around “holistic medicine.”

17. In what follows, I will consider how Pain turns away from the seemingly logical strategy of opening passages, and toward methods that at first seem irrational. In this regard, I should mention what is likely the most sustained theoretical reflection on the novel that has appeared thus far, Sergio R. Franco’s “Monsieur Pain o la crítica de la razón instrumental”; Franco makes the compelling argument that the novel “articulates a critique of instrumental reason and its avatars, science and technology” (471, my translation for this and the subsequent quotation). While I largely agree with this claim (despite Franco’s at times reductive understanding of science and technology), to my mind Franco insufficiently develops the rich potential of his own insights, suggesting of Pain, for instance, that he is incapable of understanding “a world that is no longer intelligible through the laws of syllogism” (474). I will argue, on the contrary, that Pain does just this, becoming one of the many “savage detectives” that populate Bolaño’s fiction.

18. There is another instance of this at the end of the novel, when Madame Reynaud, meeting Pain by chance in the street, introduces him to her fiancé, a certain Jean Blockman…

19. Chris Andrews makes a brief but compelling argument about Bolaño’s lists in his Roberto Bolaño’s Fiction, differentiating them from the Borgesian “inexhaustible inventory,” and instead placing them on the side of the “epic catalogue, which takes a limited set and attempts to exhaust its elements” (8).

20. It is no exaggeration to say that The Open is entirely dominated by the workings of possibility. These workings are certainly complex: after a long reflection on what Heidegger calls “the originary
possibilitization” (qtd. 66, emphasis in original) inherent to radical boredom, for instance, Agamben argues that “this potentiality or originary possibilitization constitutionally has the form of a potential-not-to, of an impotentiality, insofar as it is able to only in beginning from a being able not to” (67, emphasis in original). A being able not to, of course, is still a being able, which is why, far from an impotentiality, this fits squarely within the logic of potential or possibility.

21. Indices of this are to be found throughout *The Space of Literature*, for instance in the chapter, “The Outside, the Night,” on which I focused above, where Blanchot says of the other night: “This night is never pure night. It is essentially impure. It is not that beautiful diamond of emptiness that Mallarmé contemplates, a poetic sky beyond the sky. It is not the true night, it is night without truth, which does not lie, however, which is not false, which is not confusion where sense loses its way, which does not deceive, but from which one cannot disabuse oneself” (163/214, tr. mod.).

22. This is what Blanchot, throughout *The Space of Literature*, refers to as the origin of the work, an origin that always precedes the origin, the point at which the work “confronts the test of its impossibility” (86/105, tr. mod.).

23. Agamben’s quotation is from Aristotle.

24. See Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories*, 325–359. On the question of the murmur in *The Space of Literature*, see especially the section of the book titled “The Murmur’s Inexhaustible Character” (180–81/238–41, tr. mod.), but since I have also referred to “The Burrow,” allow me to foreground Blanchot’s comments about this story earlier in the book, specifically the way the theme of the other night arises through hearing (“the moment at which, in the night, the beast must hear the other beast” [167/221, tr. mod.]), the hearing of “an imperceptible whisper, a noise barely distinguishable from silence, the seeping sands of silence” (167/221, tr. mod.).

25. It is mysterious in its very everydayness or accessibility, which is essentially modern medicine’s understanding of it: hiccups remain, in the words of Meeri Kim, “largely a mystery” to medicine, insofar as “[d]octors don’t know what purpose they serve, nor do they know how to make them go away.” As an internist interviewed by Kim notes, “We’re still in the dark ages of understanding hiccups.” See Kim, “The hiccup remains a mystery.”

26. Pain could go in, he just can’t: the structure of the entire interaction is strikingly similar to the one that comprises the narrative of Kafka’s “Before the Law,” which, of course, concerns an open door—the doorkeeper never refuses entry once and for all to the man from the country, simply telling him, over and over, that it is possible, just not at the moment (see Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories* 3–4). In both cases, entrapment occurs precisely because of possibility: Pain notes that he “weighed up the possibility [Sopesé la posibilidad] of walking down that corridor with or without authorization, but the absurdity of the situation, and sheer surprise, held me there at the reception counter with the force of a magnet” (66/92).

27. Regarding this theme, I refer the reader to Stefanie Heine’s “Aesthetic Autophony and the Night,” where what is at stake is precisely the breathing (a distinctly nocturnal breathing) of the text. I foreground in particular her exceedingly patient reading of the electronic music artist Burial’s track “Nightmarket,” which is at once a set of observations about the ways breathing works in this track and a performance of breathing in and of itself, whereby she attains the very “presence of absence” (70) that she attributes to Burial.

28. This argument is similar in many respects to Deleuze and Guattari’s criticism, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, of Freud’s “Wolf-Man”: as the wolf is essentially a pack animal (its plurality precedes its singularity), there is never really a wolf, only wolves. See the “plateau” titled “One or Several Wolves” (26–38).

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Notes on Contributor

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