

Monteiro Lobato Today—Semicolon¹

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I'm anxious to find out for myself whether death is a comma, a semicolon or a period.
Monteiro Lobato (1948), qtd. by Edgard Cavalheiro

Describing the last days of Monteiro Lobato's life, Edgard Cavalheiro, his admirer and first biographer, recalls that the writer faced his imminent end with humor and courage. On April 21, 1948, he suffered an aneurysm. The authors of the most recent biography of Lobato, entitled *Furacão da Botocúndia*, suggest that Lobato's brain was affected in the two abilities most highly developed in him: reading and writing. The writer suddenly turned aphasic, asked his close friends: "How is it possible for me not to know what's written in that book?" Fifty years ago, facing his imminent death, the writer's lively and restless eyes, framed by thick, black brows, stared out and danced in the air, replacing the silence of his sick body with the abundance of an unsettled spiritual life.

Lobato, let us recall, was not the kind to fear death. This attitude of his is already quite clear in the short story "Bocatorra," which, according to *Furacão na Botocúndia*, was the first written by the author. Subsequently included in *Urupês*, "Bocatorra" is a homegrown version of the North American classic *King Kong* and the French film *Beauty and the Beast*, written and directed by Jean Cocteau. A wretched black man, deformed and ghastly, a freed Quasimodo, falls in love with the farmer's beautiful and distant daughter. Unable either to demonstrate his sublime love or to satisfy his vile desires, the monstrous figure watches over the girl by day and at night steps into her dreams. The virgin dies from a strange and incomprehensible disease

and is buried by her parents and fiancé. In the first hours of the day, the black man desecrates the grave and embraces the white girl, kissing her. The narrator describes the macabre scene: “a white body lay outside the tomb—embraced by a live, black man squirming like an octopus.” Life, love and death are woven together in conflict, like a decadent sculpture.

Thanks to his uncontrollable interest in others’ lives, Lobato as a youth already knew a great deal about human death. His motto as a writer is expressed in one of his short narratives: “Stories walk around on tiptoes, driven from one end to the other, the question is how to catch them.” The writer’s predisposition drove him to conquer Brazilian literature, spinning funny, scary, painful and loving yarns, narrated firsthand by the kind of ordinary country folk with whom he socialized. In the anecdotes he “catches” in order to narrate, trivial intrigues are given special emphasis; life and love are woven into the fatal encounter of characters with death itself. Early on, Lobato became familiar with the bitter taste of death without having truly tasted it. He tried it, keeping his ear to the ground and jotting down those extraordinary stories “that pull like a magnet,” as he affirmed.

Had it not been for the inappropriate advice of the physician and hygienist from Bahia, Artur Neiva, *Urupês*, his first and most famous collection of short stories would have been called *Doze Mortes Trágicas*, a more suggestive and adequate title. Thanks to the friend’s unfortunate suggestion, Lobato abandoned “tragic death” as the thread for the initial reading of the twelve stories to accept the metaphoric name of the *caboclo*’s ethos—the tree parasite known as *urupê*. “Somber *urupê* of rotten wood, lying silently in the recess of the grottos”—this is how his future character-type, Jeca Tatu, was already described at that time. Lobato is obsessive and, therefore, recidivistic.

In his next book, Lobato abandons his friend’s clumsy advice and ventures into the labyrinths of the ghost cities in the interior of São Paulo. The author does not hesitate this time. He gives the new book a fair and appropriate title: *Cidades Mortas*. Communities that used to be rich, lively and prosperous came crumbling down like termite-eaten wood during the transition from the Monarchy to the Republic. The narrator’s seemingly objective gaze is caustically enchanted by decadence and progress and dwells at length on the detailed description of big houses in ruin, “which recall brontosaurus bones from which the meat, blood and life had fled forever.”

The writer’s pen, wielding an abundant, extravagant and multicolored vocabulary, walks through the death of the mansions as if he were chatting

with a companion of adventurers. In the short story "Os Negros" ("The Blacks"), the description of the decrepitude of the mansion is passionate: "A web of cracks spreading through the walls, stained by leaks, with vague vestiges of paper. Odd furniture—two Louis XV chairs, with the inside torn, and a center table of the same style, with the marble dirtied by bat guano." And the character adds: "I'll be damned if this is not the headquarters of all the winged rats of this world and the next!"

Obsessive and recidivist, already touched by the morbid pleasure provided by the repeated experience of death, Lobato devotes himself to painting the majestic funereal scenery where the ghost cities rest and where farmers and *caboclos* move. Fire took over the country's forests, covering them with "black crepe." Just a strike of a match and nature, thirsty for rain, erupts into flames and begins to lead the funereal cortege of flora and fauna into extinction. Borrowing the war images that were suggested to him from Europe by the incendiary feats of the German "*vons*" (the text is written right at the outset of the First World War), Lobato denounces the annual burnings that spread furiously with impunity through the mountain of Mantiqueira. It burns just like the villages in Europe.

The burning of forests, the demise of nature. Mantiqueira, he denounces, is "today an immense ashtray." The patriot remarks: "The old layers of humus destroyed; the precious salts that the floods will shortly be carrying downriver into the ocean; the forest's rejuvenation of the soil paralyzed and retreating; the destruction of wild birds and the possible coming of insect plagues..." It's not hard to imagine. The half-a-dozen or so rustic Neros that Lobato describes at the beginning of the century have mushroomed at the end of this millennium, burning down what at the time was still the remote region of Roraima.

It is no wonder that the writer from São Paulo, who since his very early days had become familiar with death, should be well disposed towards the end of his own life, employing black humor and indulging in jokes about the disease and the state in which it had left him. The time had come. He will have to move on—he reckons, retiring to his bedroom—, to other experiences, to learn new things. In the short story "Os Pequenos," included in *Negrinha*, the character feels that he is becoming acquainted with the painfully bloody life of wild animals by having silenced his inner voice, which reminded him of foolish memories from the past, and by having sharpened his hearing, which made him extremely curious about the twists and turns of an original story told by a stranger.

The story, told by another and heard secretly on the docks, seems much more interesting to the character than the subjective intrigues to which the writer's imagination usually surrenders. The character says: "One of the interruptions [in my remembrances] seemed to me to be more interesting than evoking the past, because the outer life is more lively than the inner..." Internalized in the writer's addicted memory, the anecdote told by another gains a pure and stylish language and is widely circulated through the press. At the same time, it loses its original authenticity and naturalness. The other's story, from the moment it is molded by the novelist's creative spirit and is transformed into a short story, enters a zero-sum game. In short: Lobato's literary text is less interesting than the circumstances that generated it and made it possible.

For Guimarães Rosa—let us remember the forewords to *Tutaméia*—, the anecdote is like a match: once struck, once burnt, it's useless. But be careful!, adds Rosa, it acquires another, harsher usefulness. In the fictional universe of *Tutaméia*, the anecdote, even burnt, serves as a support to Guimarães Rosa "in the matters of poetry and transcendence" (3). Lobato agrees only with the first part of Rosa's reasoning. A story is taken and a manner of storytelling is overridden. Once it has been burned, Lobato takes hold of the oral narrative, stylizes it, because if he does not he neither writes stories nor publishes books. But this author is decidedly against stylizing. The narrator of the short story "Mata-pau" clarifies: "A friend told me the story that was transposed here in a possibly faithful way. The best of it has vanished, the freshness, the flow, the ingenuity of a tale narrated by someone who never learned to place pronouns properly and who, for that very reason, narrates better than all those who have assimilated literary works and grammar, anxious to acquire style." And he concludes: "Great *feuilleton* writers walk through life in God's world lost among the country folk, who have no sense of grammar, but can tell a story in a more picturesque fashion than anyone else." Lobato also clarified in another story: "I don't reproduce his words in the way [the anonymous *feuilleton* writer] has uttered them. It would be impossible, even too harmful to the understanding of the reader."

Lobato depreciates literary stylization to such a point that the editor of his works insists on transmitting to future generations of readers a recurring sentence out of the mouth of the storyteller. He is believed to have said and repeated: "My best book would be the one in which I recounted how and why I wrote my stories, one by one; the source of the stories is better than what they become."

According to Lobato, creative subjectivity matters little; what actually matters is the gesture of “catching” the story of another, a stance typical of a writer who is simultaneously a traveler, a detective and, lastly, a believer in the civilizing process. The author minimizes the complex process of internalization of an oral narrative and its expression through literary language in an attempt to enlarge the external circumstances of its delivery. Boiled down to the artistic product as such, Lobato was barely interested in the process of writing fiction, or the problems concerning the psychology of literary composition. His ramblings, somewhat poetic, closely follow the lessons of the 1870s generation of Silvio Romero and José Veríssimo and are reduced to a critique of the nationalist idealizations produced by Brazilian Romantic literature.

In a well-known statement on the literary expression of nationality, included in *Cidades Mortas*, Lobato replaced the Native Brazilian with the post-slavery *caboclo*. The simplicity in evolutionary reasoning is so great that it would seem that we are facing a hardly thoughtful misprint. Lobato writes: “The macaw’s crest of feathers turned into a straw hat, pulled down over the forehead; the open space in the forest into a thatched hut; the Native Brazilian club tapering off, growing a trigger, placing its ear to the ground, is now a rifle...”—and so continues the enumeration. In “A Criação do Estilo” he returns to his hobbyhorse. He proposes that fauns, satyrs and bacchantes, fruits of the European imaginary, be replaced with “Iaras” (queens of the waters) and “Marabás” (beautiful women, offspring of a Native Brazilian woman and a white man). Once again he lashes out at romantic novelists in *Cidades Mortas*. This time he chooses the famous novelist Bernardo Guimarães as scapegoat: “To read him is like going to the brushwood, to the bush—but to a bush as described by a Catholic girl in high school, where the grasslands are *pleasant*, the orchards *in blossom*, the rivers *torrential*, the forests *verdant*...”—and so on and so forth.

Having questioned the literary value of his own short story, what interests Lobato more is the eventual consumer of the good. He is interested in another *external and unexpected* circumstance—the dialogue between the book and the reader. Books are there to be read. This is Lobato’s small but fundamental discovery in a country of illiterate people. The story “Facada Imortal,” a real masterpiece, was written for sentimental reasons. It would have been more appropriate to write the circumstances that prompted it instead of the story itself. His friend Raul is the main character, and “Facada

Immortal” was also written for him. When the writer comes across his friend, whose body is suffering from a terminal disease, he seeks to alleviate his pain. How? By inventing a story in which the sick man himself would be the character. The reading of the short story ended by serving, as the editor’s note reveals, “as the best morphine injection he had ever been given.” Lobato believed that stories help friends to bear the sufferings of death.

Perhaps for these and similar reasons, Lobato as both an editor and publisher of books—so very much present in the series of substantive articles collected under the title “Opinions”—matters more than Lobato the writer and the incurable gossip. But the reasons for writing and reading the short story are not always those dictated by Christian charity and good brotherly sentiments. Edgard Cavalheiro boldly draws one’s attention to the fact that the brilliant creation of *Jeca Tatu* can be taken as “the unsuccessful farmer’s revenge” (20). Stories help us to take vengeance on small and wretched betrayals, believed Lobato.

Sérgio Milliet probes the wound with greater precision. He affirms that “*Jeca Tatu* is almost a personal vengeance; he is the miserable *caboclo* as seen through the harsh eyes of the frustrated farmer” (267). *Jeca Tatu* was written by a farmer for the servants, to be read by those who regard themselves as the “*Jeca Tatus*” of life. It is no mere chance that, up to 1982, the editions of the booklet *Jeca Tatuzinho*, funded by the Fontoura Medical Laboratory, should have sold more than one hundred million copies. It should be at the top of the Brazilian bestsellers list. Because of this, Milliet detects less humor and more sarcasm in Lobato’s satirical short stories. The critic explains: “humor, a connoisseur once said, springs from the tenderness and sense of modesty of those who are shy. It is a kind of compensation, while sarcasm is a transfer of the spirit of revolt. It is with sarcasm that the intellectual avenges himself on others; it is through humor that he punishes himself” (267).

Monteiro Lobato was very much aware of his own value and the value of his legacy. At the time when an aneurysm brought him close to death, between a joke or two, the kind that serve to restrain memories of the past, Lobato uttered a sentence which his biographer and admirer was quick to copy. He said that he was anxious “to find out for himself if death was a comma, a semicolon or a period” (Cavalheiro 59).

Appearing to be a mere joke cracked by a gossip and grumpy old man, the sentence mentioned above takes up afresh the obsessive idea that I have been highlighting in this reading of Monteiro Lobato’s literary works for

grownups. A pragmatic man, he wanted to know immediately the value and the relevance of life and work. Death is the only yardstick and therefore the real instrument by which to measure and assess life, be it the life of a man, of an animal, or of a vegetable. Death is also the yardstick that can be used to measure and assess man's works. During his life of trials and tribulations, Lobato became well versed in death thanks to countless characters and situations, which abound in his stories and fictional impressions. That was not enough though.

Affected temporarily by agraphia, he seeks to listen to the voice beyond the grave. He wants to meet death *personally*. He wants to find a new scale, new weights and measures. Is it not in the game behind a death/life antithesis, the antithesis that is always mediated by love, that one discovers the truth about a life and an artistic work? In the already mentioned and famous tale "Facada Imortal," the narrator asks: "what is a story if not a stylized antithesis"? In the story in *Urupês* dedicated to Maupassant, Lobato, while clarifying the principles of the French writer's fictional art, declares with the same words the orienting principle of his own fictional art: "Because life is love and death, and Maupassant's art is nine times out of ten an ingenious setting of love and death." Let us recall once again that the original title of *Urupês* focused on tragic deaths, *Doze Mortes Trágicas*.

The yardstick Lobato chose to measure life and work he borrowed from the grammatical model, which he learned in order to build his Baroque, metaphoric, affirmative and booming sentences. A stop in life may be of little importance—the sentence is prolonged to become incisive after a *comma*. A stop can be a fleeting stumble, which allows the sentence to breathe, to attain balance and to expand—the sentence continues to be robust after a *semicolon*. A full stop in life can occur—here lies the fate of a single *period*. It is through the sentences he listened to as a prying eavesdropper and jotted down as an anthropologist, it is through the sentences he wrote and which defined him as a fiction writer, it is through the sentences he chiseled and published in print form that he became a writer, it is through the worked and rebellious sentence, sheer dynamite, that Lobato wants to be judged by the citizens and the critics.

Would the life and work of Monteiro Lobato disappear definitively, as did "Bocatorta," the ghost cities and the mountain of Mantiqueira? Or would they find refuge for some years in a few generous, critical words? Or would they win fame and be enshrined *post mortem* by many a repeated word of praise, uttered at fiftieth anniversaries or centenary celebrations?

One of his most lucid and merciless critics, Sérgio Milliet, formulated the question of Monteiro Lobato's legacy quite early on and answered it four years prior to the author's death on September 30, 1944. In the second volume of his *Diário Crítico*, we read that Lobato "will be put through the strainer of merciless revisions, and will still find mind-boggling enthusiasm. In the end, a dozen model stories will enter into anthologies. Also, the better part of his children's literature, which only finds its match in the great international children's literature" (269).

Lobato not only opposed tropical indolence, but was also openly in favor of both work—which lends soul to man and builds charismatic leaders—and the evolution of science—which brings progress to the nation—as well as the evolution of techniques which foster the well-being of citizens. In spite of these notions, Lobato began his professional life at a time when the country was given over to total moral and civic abandonment. The literature of the time is clearly pessimistic and bitter, given the works of Afonso Arinos (*Pelo Sertão*), Euclides da Cunha (*Os Sertões*) and Lima Barreto (*Triste Fim de Policarpo Quaresma*). In the Old Republic, these are the "ingenious framers of love and death." In his early discovery of the movement that gives rise to these conflicts of "stylized antithesis" there is perhaps to be found one of the reasons for why Lobato has always been so sensitive to and impatient before any stop—any kind of abandonment, any paralysis, or any "cachexia" ("emaciation"), to use his own precious vocabulary, so out of fashion in the minimalist aesthetics dominant today.

"Our Progress," he wrote in *Cidades Mortas*, "is nomadic and subject to sudden paralysis." And he goes on: "The gypsy's progress survives in tents. It migrates, leaving behind it a train of ugly shanties." In a subsequent book, *Mr. Slang e o Brasil*, he will add: "Everything in our midst is an emergency, that is to say, a personal, occasional, momentary and temporary solution." Lobato looks for and has always looked for the precise meaning of any stop, of any abandonment or of any paralysis in order to better criticize them. For that, the yardstick of life was worthwhile. Worthwhile too was the desire to point out the reasons for the country's backwardness. He was a fighter who, through the easy and disabused use of the harsh and unexpected word, projected a rebellious attitude, who disliked the powers of the Old Republic, of the New Republic and of the dictatorial state proclaimed by Getúlio Vargas' New State ("Estado Novo").

Master of a sophisticated style as well as remarkably erudite, how could Monteiro Lobato have arrived at such simplistic and all-encompassing

diagnoses of Brazilian cultural, social and economic reality? The background for the answer to this question lies in the aristocratic pessimism, full of good intentions, that Monteiro Lobato, like Paulo Prado, the author of *Retrato do Brasil*, cultivated in the scenery of Brazil's ethnic formation. The definitive coloring of that aristocratic scenery lies in the almost proverbial saying found in *Mr. Slang e o Brasil*: "Chickpea, lazybones and gumbo banana and the black man with gumbo have given unto our land the fruits they could." Foreshadowing the "tropicalist" movement led by Caetano Veloso and Glauber Rocha, Monteiro Lobato settles into being a writer, doubling as a doctor, a hygienist, a biologist, a bible preacher and an economist.

He stands up to the "technical experts" of this or that specific discipline with the common sense of the people, taking his cue from Henry Ford. Combining the encyclopedic knowledge of a generalist, imbued with patriotic pessimism, naïve but driven by the ideology of individual progress through work, Lobato succeeds in diagnosing with *imprecise details* the true dilemmas of the nation. With the spirit of a generalist mixed with that of the common people, he diagnoses the simple causes of the diseases of Brazilian tropical civilization (causes described as complex by a stupid and corrupt State and the deceitful elite, see the short story "Um Suplício Moderno") and attempts to save them with the proselytizing typical of an evangelical preacher.

The generalist takes the prescription book out of his pocket and hands over a prescription for the cashier to prepare. The former is likely to prescribe for each illness diagnosed, the perfect and efficacious medicine, and the latter is likely to give the miraculous injections, laying down new guidelines for the development and progress that would deliver country and citizens from the asphyxiating paralysis. The simplicity of the analysis, we might repeat, is favorable to an all-encompassing vision and also to miraculous cures.

Latent in both Lobatos was a "Fordism" that became obvious and explicit after his trip to the United States at the end of the 1920s. In *Mr. Slang e o Brasil*, he writes: "After Henry Ford demonstrated how you can employ even the blind and the crippled, nobody's got the right to allege he's of no use. Everyone has some value. Even a blind man, even a mutilated man is of some use. The whole question then lies in *providing them with the conditions necessary to be of some use.*"

Lobato's long-standing and definitive battle, which brought him early fame, was the desire to provide the conditions necessary for the parasite Jeca

Tatu to be of some use. To arrive at the diagnosis of Jeca Tatu's backwardness, the "doctor" neutralized the harmful effects caused by him and his peers in constituting their miserable object of study. And that is why Lobato posed as the liberator of the people and, notwithstanding, was unfair and merciless towards the same people. Lobato forgot that he—and other landholding friends—were the true parasites of the ancestors of the current servants, as they had been of the former slaves as well. It was in this parasitical condition that it fell to him to diagnose the illness of the *caboclo*-parasite. The guilt of the one who exploits other people's work (the landowner) is hidden in order that the indolence of the exploited (the *caboclo*) may be highlighted.

The *caboclo* lived—if it can be called living—like a parasite of the earth, affirms Lobato the farmer. The *caboclo* seemed to him the "louse of the earth," in every manner akin to *Argas*—which attacks chickens—and *Sarcoptes mutans*—which attacks the legs of domestic birds. He was a predator, loose in social space, like one of the monsters in the most recent Hollywood science fiction films. He is against life. Just like the *mata-pau* (the "parasite"), the *caboclo* is a parasite that destroys life. "The tree dies and leaves within itself [the "*mata-pau*"] rotten wood." It destroys the good seed. The *caboclo* is a *native of the tropics*, he is as wild as the nature that formed him, which is why one is a copy of the other. There is not a single history that recounts the fight of those "parasited" against tropical nature and the powerful elite, which only later found them to be parasites. All the *caboclos* are spongers and thugs. It is thus necessary to exterminate the race of internal villains. "Hygiene is the secret key to victory," repeats Lobato. A task for hygienists, Lobato turns to them. A beneficial and patriotic task, without a doubt, but what then?

Countless are the literary versions that Lobato gives us of the ills of the miserable Brazilian parasitism, sophisticated versions always backed up by the encyclopedic knowledge of a generalist, who quotes examples from biology and zoology. The classic example, the theme of a short story in *Urupês*, is the parasitic tree the *mata-pau*, which kills another (the drawing of the *mata-pau* skillfully sketched by the writer circulates in beautiful reproductions in his books (*Furacão na Botocúndia* 85). In the face of the *mata-pau*, the narrator's imagination does not merely think about it, it thinks of literature. In literature he discovers classical references: "the serpents of Laocoon, the warm viper in the breast of the man of the fable, King Lear's daughters, all the classic figures of ingratitude."

There is another example of parasitism in the constant references to the bird known as the shiny cowbird (*chupim*). The most disturbing of the parasitic figures undoubtedly appears in the short story "Os Pequenos." The small bird known as the *periperi* discovers and mercilessly attacks the weak point of a great ostrich. The *periperi* settles under a wing, where it cannot be removed by the ostrich. The ostrich spins like a lunatic ennobled by pain, without ever succeeding in freeing itself from the bloodsucker. The parasite has a Darwinian moral: it will be strong by killing the ostrich. Let's set aside the good intentions in reading this apologue. Who is the ostrich? Who is the parasite? Why are the demonic "little ones" (*pequenos*) diabolical, and the ostrich noble?

Transferring the theme of the *caboclo* stories to the urban world, Lobato once again lends biological images to parasitism and creates new characters. In "O Fisco," included in the collection *Negrinha*, the narrator establishes successive comparisons between certain functions of the human body and life in the city. The street is the artery, those in transit are the blood. The troublemaker, the drunk and the thief are the harmful microbes, disturbing the circulatory rhythm determined by the work of, in particular, the Italian immigrants. The policeman is the leucocyte—the Metchenikoff's *phagocyte*. And so goes the short story: "No sooner is the traffic congested by the antisocial action of the troublemaker than the phagocyte gets cracking, it walks, runs, it pounces on the bad element and drags it down to the slammer." The fight against urban parasitism devises a repressive city—São Paulo—whose attitude, powerful and orderly, is disturbed only by the State's harmful restrictions to free initiative, which themselves appear in the form of the "corrupt tax authority" (see "Da Camisola de Força," *Mr. Slang e o Brasil*).

Roberto Ventura, in a remarkable chapter of *Estilo Tropical*, showed how Manuel Bonfim (*A América Latina*, 1905) conceived of society as an organism, but he also tried to investigate the non-biological laws proper to social facts. Instead of establishing simple homologies between biological and social knowledge (as did Monteiro Lobato), he mapped the differences between the fields. Manuel Bonfim borrowed concepts from biology and zoology, but he also clearly and precisely defined the validity of the transfer of scientific concepts to the analysis of the social field. Therefore, a comparative study of the concept of *parasitism* in Manuel Bonfim and Monteiro Lobato calls for careful consideration.

In the shift from Bonfim to Lobato there is a bourgeoisification, a theoretical impoverishment in the fecundity of the homological patterns likely to serve as tools to explain the social reality of the country and of the Western world. In Bonfim, the pattern of the parasite and the parasited in nature would help to explain the dominant and the dominated in society, masters and slaves, capital and work, metropolis and colony, imperialism and nationalism. The most important step Bonfim has taken is in refusing the homology between biology and society. Thus, Roberto Ventura writes, the essayist has to establish “the differences between *organic* parasitism, which would bring about irreversible modifications in the organisms, and *social parasitism*, which could be extirpated by those parasited—the slave, the worker, the proletarian, the nation—by means of struggling against the various forms of exploitation” (157). That is how, Ventura continues, Bonfim escapes the pessimism and determinism of the theories of milieu, race and Brazilian national character.

Antonio Candido, in a brief and definitive article on Manuel Bonfim, complements the words of Roberto Ventura, signaling that parasitism, described in *A América Latina* as “the original sin,” shows how the parasite, living off the total exploitation of the parasited, ends up unable to survive without it, and so deteriorates and drops, allowing for the emergence of important new elements. Candido concludes: “This is how the continuity of the structure is preserved through the change of the agents; thus the conditions are never truly created for really free work, which would make for well-being and social balance” (138).

Notes

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