

A Response to “Katrina Trask: The Gilded Age of Philanthropy,” by Khristeena Lute

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“It is hard to have one’s own personal joy cut short, but the universal happiness that comes from service is, believe me, a bigger thing than anything personal can be!” (Trask 248)

This extract from Katrina Trask’s *The Invisible Balance Sheet* (1916) remarkably captures what must have been Trask’s reflections as she was nearing the end of a life punctuated by tragic losses and personal dramas. The novel—written when its author was in her early sixties, after a series of heart attacks and other health problems left her an invalid in the care of family servants—provides yet another illustration of Trask’s belief in what Khristeena Lute calls “the role of the divine female to serve as a guide to those around her,” and I would like to use it to continue the discussion of Trask’s literary merits which Lute encourages in her highly perceptive analysis, one that does ample justice to a woman of many talents. By the time Trask wrote *The Invisible Balance Sheet*, the dialectical relationship between the physical and the spiritual, which Lute insightfully identifies in Trask’s early poetical works, had developed into a tension between the seen and the unseen, which similarly energized Trask’s creative process in the 1910s. Such concerns already lay at the basis of a 1915 essay entitled *The Mighty and the Lowly*, in which Trask recognized that “[d]isproportionate riches are a barrier to the development of the ultimate social good” and that “a privileged class manifestly retards the coming of an ideal state of society,” before concluding that “our utmost practical and political energy and influence must be put into the work of changing the conditions” (12–3). Along similar lines, Trask’s 1916 novel sheds light on what stands out as the major moral dilemma underpinning the full arc of her life and career, namely the need to reconcile her social status as an immensely wealthy woman with her belief in selfless service as the only path to “universal happiness.”

On a first reading, *The Invisible Balance Sheet* could fit quite snugly within the American tradition of the rags-to-riches narrative popularized by Horatio Alger in the second half of the 19th century: the story of a poor young man who inherits a fortune left to him by a great-uncle and who can thus devote his lifetime to the pursuit of knowledge and self-cultivation sounds like a truly American fairy-tale with a Dickensian flavor, one which might seem slightly incongruous, outdated, or even escapist as daily reports from war-torn Europe at that time were bringing news of repeated atrocities. However, Trask's determination to revisit the classic American inheritance plot soon becomes obvious to the attentive reader. Unlike other narratives in which the hero is wrongfully deprived of his rightful inheritance by scheming enemies or unfortunate circumstances, and coming into an inheritance becomes the aim of the quest, *The Invisible Balance Sheet* sets out to explore the moral consequences of stepping into a dead man's shoes—something which Kate Chopin had sketched out a few years before in the story "Dead Men's Shoes" (1897) and which Trask more fully investigates within the scope of her novel's full-blown tragedy. In Trask's rewriting of the inheritance narrative, inheriting is not the be-all-and-end-all but only the catalyst of a plot in which she grapples with the very idea of inheritance: what to do with it if this legacy is not eventually passed on to one's heirs—a question that must have resonated poignantly in the mind of a mother who had lost all four of her beloved children. How to conciliate an intended inheritance with the quest for an ideal? How to turn it into a force for good?

Trask cleverly gives her story another twist by having her tragic hero become the victim of his late great-uncle's lifelong hatred of women: John can inherit this immense fortune only if he pledges never to marry anyone. The young man who was just then on the point of proposing to his childhood sweetheart, Marion, eventually succumbs to the lure of money and breaks all ties with his former life. The tragedy is clinched when he opens his eyes, only too late, to the extent of his mistake, seeks to go back on the deal only to realize he will never be able to pay back what he has already spent of his uncle's legacy, and is eventually murdered by a pauper who has been dogging his footsteps like the shadow of a guilty conscience for months.

Faustian undertones are unmistakable in the delineation of a man who sells his soul to the Devil's ambassador (his great-uncle's executor, the mysterious, cynical Mr. Grimes),¹ realizes that life is not really worth living on such terms ("He was bearing nothing: he was eating the fruit of a dead man's labours from the hands of a dead man," 204), and plunges the woman he loves into torment and misery. In light of Khristeena Lute's valuable insights about the primacy of the

Eternal-Feminine in Trask's life and work, such literary connections might not be merely fortuitous. What Goethe exposes in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), as in the destinies of Wilhelm Meister and of Faust, is the vanity and lethal nature of self-centeredness. Similar concerns run through *The Invisible Balance Sheet*, a novel which is driven from the outset by the keen awareness that "selfishness is the arch enemy of the Ideal, the perilous foe to the realisation of the dream" (9). What John has yet to discover is the "thrill of creative power" (348), which stems from service to others. Marion herself experiences such a thrill when she becomes aware of her ability to "do something for the race" through the power of education:

Something of the glad throb of life had begun to stir again beneath her pain: it was the happiness which inevitably comes from any earnest interest and eager service for others.

Her life was growing every day more interested and more interesting, more touched with colour as she merged her personal life in the work of the world: she felt the joy of the creator as she took plastic young minds in her hands to shape them for the future — she felt that she was making history in training the mothers of men.

'I will never marry,' she constantly said to herself: 'I shall never be a mother, but I can do the larger work of motherhood, in passing on the torch to the next generation. I shall have thousands of children, instead of three or four, and perhaps I can do something for the race! Oh, the joy of sowing seeds that will spring up when I am gone!'

Thereupon, Marion, in a rush of rapture and exhilaration, would fling her arms wide to the sky and feel the thrill of creative power pass through her. (348)

Significantly, artistic creation appears to be inseparable from the notion of "service for others" with which educating young minds is equated. As he painfully emerges from the state of intoxication in which his sudden fortune has plunged him, John remembers the beliefs that used to drive him forward: "His old theory comes back to him—the theory which he urged long ago with youthful enthusiasm—that each man is an artist and life is the plastic material in his hand to mould for good or ill" (321).

1. When old Eben disrupts a charming tête-à-tête between John and Marion to tell the young man about Mr. Grimes, John actually asks him to tell this importunate visitor to "go to the devil" (32). On their first meeting in the following chapter, the notion of service is given prominence right away when John asks Mr. Grimes "In what way may I be of service to you, Mr. Grimes?", an offer disdained by his haughty, complacent visitor: "as if he, so bucolic and so young, could serve the Honourable William Grimes of the great Law Firm of Grimes and Marvin!" (38).

That Trask should have entrusted her main female character with the task of guiding an erring young man back onto the path of productive service comes as no surprise if we consider her own attempts to make sense of the many misfortunes that had befallen her over the years. John's mother could also have provided him with help and guidance, but she has long been dead by the time the story starts, and her son disregards her actual message as exemplified by the model she set in her own life—when she forsook her own inheritance in order to marry the man she loved, the aptly named Peter Wright. Another important—albeit minor—female character is Miss Howe, headmistress of the school where Marion finds some employment as a teacher. She is the one who instills in Marion the joy of service as a path to “universal happiness” (248) in the above quoted admonition. Her name might have been chosen to evoke that of another maternal figure who had passed away only a few years before – Julia Ward Howe, with whom Trask shared a deep-seated pacifist streak and a strong belief that women's growing involvement in the political field would bring about a more peaceful world. Once Marion has come to terms with the fact that she will never bear any offspring, she launches herself whole-heartedly into “the larger work of motherhood” (348), in line with both Goethe's ideal of the Eternal-Feminine and his conception of activity as “the true service to God in nature” (Safranski 526). As Goethe scholar Jake Safranski puts it:

For Goethe, the devil did not exist. If you believe in God, you have to believe in the devil as well, and Goethe believed in neither a transcendent God nor the devil. He had been a Spinozist all his life, and his watchword was *deus ex natura*. God is nature in its entire richness and creative power. And man can and should discover, preserve, and use his creative power, which also lives within him. Activity is thus the true service to God in nature, and the drive to create is absolutely never ending. (526)

Ultimately, the work of fashioning the minds of the future is left in the care of “artists” like Marion. No doubt that in turning her estate into an artists' retreat Trask also wanted to contribute to this process in the hope of sowing the seeds for more enlightened minds that would salvage some shreds of meaning out of the rubble of the war and use them to rebuild a better world. I concur with Lute when she points to the fact that Trask felt uncomfortable with the status of wealthy philanthropist and that she probably thought of herself more as a servant—in the nobler sense of the word than the one her own upper-class society would have commonly attributed to it—than as a patron of the arts. One might argue that philanthropy stands somewhere halfway between charity and politics and that with it there is always, deep down, a form of investment in the future. For Trask, though, the work of philanthropy might not have been so

much a financial as a moral investment, a way of being of service to the generations of the future. The tension between these two levels of investment is neatly captured by a title that draws the reader's attention to the spiritual dimension ("invisible") attendant to any financial transaction ("balance sheet"). Despite its slightly antiquated plot machinery, this is actually a novel in which Trask articulates very contemporary concerns as she reflects upon the duties of the private self in a public world in crisis. One might safely assume that she would willingly have made hers what Julia Ward Howe refers to as Goethe's motto in her autobiography: "Time is my inheritance; time is my estate" (qtd. in Howe 205). One hundred years after her death, the legacy of Katrina Trask to the world of art remains a vibrant testimony to the power of such ideals.

Works Cited

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