

## THE WILL, MISTRESS OF THE SOUL<sup>1</sup>

To every man there openeth  
A way and ways and a way,  
And the High Soul climbs the High way  
And the Low Soul gropes the Low,  
And, in between, on the misty flats,  
The rest drift to and fro.  
And to every man there openeth  
A High way and a Low,  
And every man decideth  
The way his Soul shall go.

John Oxenham<sup>2</sup>

When I was a child—when there was no such thing as television—my parents and nannies read to me stories of heroes and heroines which began “Once upon a time...” and concluded with a ritual just as fixed “... and they all lived happily ever after.” The exercise was as regular and as ordered as a sonata—a beginning; a theme and development; a resolution; a conclusion. It was part of the formation every parent aims to give his child in its innocence, to embrace the good the philosophers call ‘the arduous’ and to reject the evil, its opposite. The object? To direct the child to beatitude, eternal living happily ever after—“perfect possession, altogether, of endless life”<sup>3</sup>, as Boetthius defined it. In our most earthly activities, in the depths of the family and the immediacy of the present moment, there is in the heart of every man this call to beatitude. We cannot help ourselves. “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are not at rest until they rest in Thee.”<sup>4</sup>

Just as a parent is not the creator of his child, only the instrument whereby God brings him into existence, so neither does the parent know his child’s destiny. Our own actions are inevitably less good than they should be, marked with that original defect which inclines us, as St Paul says, to do the things we shouldn’t, and to fail in the things we should. Even with the best of intentions, our endeavours often fail of their object. We give our children example: we hope for their best development, resolution and conclusion, but we cannot pre-determine it. In the end it is the individual—child; adolescent; adult—who must work out the struggle for himself; determine his own destiny. This is the mystery of human freedom. Often those we

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<sup>1</sup> This is a poor translation of the succinct Latin expression, *Domina voluntas*. ‘Mistress’ has so many layers of meaning in modern English, several of them pejorative. *Domina* is best translated ‘Lady’, as the complement of ‘Lord’, rather than ‘Mistress’—thus: *Dominus, Domina*—but with the decline of the understanding, and reading, of Latin by the English speaking, English idiom has lost the Latin rigour which formerly characterised it. Needless to say, those responsible for much of this loss are the Modernists and semi-Modernists who have flourished in the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council. For those interested in exploring the issue, Dorothy M. Sayers delights in using the juxtaposition *Dominus, Domina* in her detective novels. She also has much to say in her academic papers on the loss of Latin.

<sup>2</sup> John Oxenham, pen name of William Arthur Dunkerley [1852-1941], English journalist and poet.

<sup>3</sup> Boetthius [480-524 AD] *The Consolation of Philosophy*, bk. v, c. 6

<sup>4</sup> St Augustine, *Confessions*, I, 1.

thought the best, turn out the worst: often the apparently worst turn out (in the end) to be the best—a great mystery!

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How do you persuade a man in this Godless age to turn to God? You can advance your reasons cogently, reasons capable of persuading him; reasons which, abstracted from every extrinsic influence, are compelling. And he will smile, make some vacuous response, and change the subject! The problem is not one of reason but of the will. So few are open to argument not because they do not have an intellect to address what you put to them, but because they WILL not allow their intellect to address it. The young Thomas Merton put the issue well in his autobiography:

“[A]s long as the will, the *domina voluntas*, did not belong completely to God, even the intellectual conversion was bound to remain precarious and indefinite. For although the will cannot force the intellect to see an object other than it is, it can turn it away from the object altogether, and prevent it from considering that thing at all.”<sup>5</sup>

The majority of men in the modern world refuse to listen to reason because they have already committed their wills elsewhere.

The exigencies of the age are such that most people spend their leisure time allowing themselves to be indoctrinated. Anyone who indulges in a regular diet of radio, television—whether news or entertainment—newspapers, or films, cannot help ingesting ideology. He is a slave to the pre-packaged willings of the producers and presenters of this material. None of it is free: it all comes with ideological underlay. Without understanding how, a man finds himself sympathetic to the idea of a mechanical and Godless universe; to an uncritical acceptance of the scandals that mark human frailty—divorce, contraception, *in vitro* fertilisation of human embryos, justification for abortion and the use of ‘surplus’ human embryos in the aid of science. In other words, he finds himself sympathetic to the mores of secular humanism. He may never have attended a lecture advocating any of these aberrations of human behaviour; yet he becomes a believer in the ideology which promotes them *through his negligence*.

The root of the problem is subjectivism, the habit of mind that says that what matters is not reality, but what I think about reality. We have elaborated on this subject and its causes in a number of papers on this website.<sup>6</sup> The frightful, eternally enduring, effect of subjectivism, as of modern philosophy its source (as of the heresy of Modernism which is its evil fruit), is the general obliviousness of modern man to his eternal destiny. We don’t bring ourselves into existence; we don’t keep ourselves in existence; we didn’t determine our nature—*man* rather than donkey, mosquito,

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<sup>5</sup> *The Seven Storey Mountain*, New York, 1948. Published in Great Britain, with certain excisions and editing by Evelyn Waugh, as *Elected Silence*, London (Burns & Oates), 1949, (My copy, *Elected Silence*, 1969 reprint) at pp. 150-1.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. [http://www.superflumina.org/subjectivism\\_contents.html](http://www.superflumina.org/subjectivism_contents.html);  
<http://www.superflumina.org/metaphysics.html>

fish or scrub turkey—before we started to exist. We do not even give ourselves the most basic things in life like sunlight or oxygen. All these things are given to us. It follows inevitably that there must be a giver. It is not only reasonable, it is inevitable, that a man should believe in God. It is not only reasonable, it is inevitable (*unavoidable*), that God—

- is not just some blind amorphous force, but a person with intellect and will such as those with which he has endowed us;
- should have communicated with his intellectual creature, *man*;
- will (as we would) demand a reckoning for the use made of the talents with which he has endowed us.

So what is to happen at the end of a life lived in the aura of the subjectivist spirit—mindless atheism? Of what use the argument that the majority of mankind accepted this spirit when a man faces his maker? No place for democracy then: God is not interested in majorities. There was a memorable line in the 1980's BBC television thriller *The Edge of Darkness* uttered by the police officer hero, Ronald Craven, to his daughter: "We all do, you know; we all die alone." It ought to be printed up over the doorway of every house. Each one of us must meet his maker *alone*, even those engaged in a suicide pact. In his narrative poem, *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot wrote:

O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,  
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,  
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent ment of letters,  
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,  
Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees,  
Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark,  
And dark the Sun and Moon, and the Almanach de Gotha  
And the Stock Exchange Gazette, the Directory of Directors,  
And cold the sense and lost the motive of action.  
And we all go with them, into the silent funeral,  
Nobody's funeral, for there is no one to bury...<sup>7</sup>

What matters in life is the end, in both senses, *object* and *termination*. Those who have not as the object of their lives the perfectly satiative good, Almighty God, and strive to conform their lives to his commands, are empty and they will end in emptiness—the *vacant into the vacant*—and what an emptiness that will be!

"We live our lives," as my parish priest once pungently remarked, "between heaven and hell." This earthly life is a battleground and the object of the battle is a man's own soul. The one who realises it is blessed: the one who does not is living in a fool's paradise.

Michael Baker

8<sup>th</sup> April 2007—*Easter Sunday*

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<sup>7</sup> East Coker, III, *Four Quartets*, London, mcmxlv (1944).