

Book Reviews

Beauty in the Word: Rethinking the Foundations of Education
Stratford Caldecott
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2012
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Certain books offer such a refreshing view of their subject that they revive or reinforce one's belief in its importance and value. The distinctive quality of Stratford Caldecott's *Beauty in the Word* is captured in the first word of the subtitle, "Rethinking the Foundations of Education." He sets out to show the enduring validity of the liberal arts, but not by repeating the traditional justifications. Rather he *rethinks* the fundamental purposes of education by shedding new light on the *Trivium*—the original elements of a liberal arts education, known as the language or verbal arts, comprising Grammar, Dialectic and Rhetoric.

Beauty in the Word forms a companion volume to an earlier work, *Beauty for Truth's Sake* (2009), which focused on the other parts of a liberal arts education—the *Quadrivium*, consisting of Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy. Whereas the earlier book focused on the mathematical arts and explained

how they could foster a rational understanding of the world, this new work considers the language arts and explores how rationality can be reconciled with poetry and art and music, so that a scientific view of reality does not mean forfeiting a poetic and artistic appreciation of it. The author offers a timely observation that science itself requires both of these qualities in order to progress. After all, as he notes, "we owe scientific breakthroughs as much to great acts of imagination as to feats of observation or calculation (one thinks of Einstein trying to picture running alongside a beam of light, or comparing in his mind's eye the experience of being in a falling lift or elevator with that of floating freely in space, on the basis of which he developed the special and general theories of relativity)."

Caldecott recognises the huge difficulty in proposing this approach amid the conditions of present-day education. He is acutely aware of how fragmented and incoherent the average school—let alone university—curriculum has become, as our culture has lost any sense of intellectual unity and historical perspective. "It is as though," the author writes, "we were attempting to construct the top floor of

a building without bothering with the lower floors or foundations.” He is keen to reunify the approaches to knowledge and understanding and show how the liberal arts provide a way of bridging the gulf between science and the humanities, and between reason and the imagination.

In successive chapters on the *Trivium*, he peels back the layers of settled interpretation and offers original perspectives on its core elements. The chapter on Grammar is headed “Remembering,” and Caldecott reveals the close relationship between language and memory, arguing that the grammar of a language is not confined to sentence construction, important though that is, but extends to the skill of interpretation. It involves the reading of symbols that reflect individual letters and sounds and build to whole words and texts. Caldecott emphasises the significance of stories as “vehicles of meaning” which embody traditions that reach back into the past to illuminate the present. In one of many Chestertonian touches, he cites J.R.R. Tolkien on the profound value of fairy-tales in initiating young people into the world of reality. It was by the enchantment of such stories that Tolkien, in his own words, “divined the potency

of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine.”

The author then probes more fully—and surprisingly—into the meaning of Grammar by suggesting that it rests on an even deeper foundation, that of music; a point which Anthony Esolen emphasises in a very thoughtful Introduction to *Beauty in the Word*.

“Music,” Caldecott points out, “is the wordless language on which poetry—the purest and most concentrated form of speech—is built. Poetry is made of images, similes, metaphors, analogies; but what holds these elements together and makes them live is fundamentally musical in nature. . . . Music in turn is a play of mathematics, coherent patterns of numbers and shape in time and space, expressed in rhythm and timbre, tone and pitch. It is the closest most of us get to seeing and feeling the beauty of mathematics.”

Turning to the second language art, Dialectic, Caldecott builds on Grammar (as the art of reading and interpretation, based on Remembering) to elucidate Dialectic, which is headed as “Thinking” and described as the

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art of analysis or discernment of the truth. Thus it is a part of philosophy (though not the whole). More exactly, it is an *instrument* of philosophy, whose role is to foster contemplation that will lead to wisdom. The author quotes extensively from Chesterton in this chapter, particularly his essays on philosophy, highlighting Chesterton's extraordinary ability to apply the tools of the *Trivium* to everyday life. In Caldecott's judgment, Chesterton "is a perfect example of someone who managed to attain as a grown-up the healthy wisdom and wondering appreciation of a child—a truly integrated man. He was not an academic philosopher but rather a journalist and a 'man of letters' (a man, in other words, of the *Trivium*)."

A pervasive concern of the author's is how the principles of a liberal education can best be conveyed to children. Noting Dorothy Sayers' famous essay on "the Lost Tools of Learning," he explains how she associates each of the three language arts—Grammar, Dialectic and Rhetoric—with a particular stage of child development. The Grammar stage corresponds to the learning of words by heart and the chanting of nursery rhymes, while the Dialectic phase is concerned with

placing facts in an intelligible framework, extending numbers and words to the development of arguments and historical narratives. The process of development culminates in the Rhetoric stage, in which the child learns how to present an argument convincing to others, and how to communicate a personal experience to the wider world.

Caldecott completes his reflections on Dialectic by pondering its religious dimensions. He notes the connection between "thinking" and "thanking," which is captured in the etymology of the word itself as "thought" comes from the Old English *thanc*. He quotes Chesterton's remark that "*thanking* is the highest form of thought," since it penetrates to the highest truths about things; an acknowledgement that creation is a "gift," and a gift invites gratitude as a "gift in return"—an act of *thanksgiving*, which, as the author reminds us, is the meaning of the word "Eucharist."

The third part of the *Trivium* which Caldecott re-examines is Rhetoric. While Dialectic provides a pathway to discovering and knowing the truth, thereby revealing *how we know*, Rhetoric focuses on *how we express the truth*. The author points out that

the essence of Rhetoric “is not a set of techniques to impress (oratory, eloquence), nor a means of manipulating the will and emotions of others (sophistry, advertising), but rather a way of liberating the freedom of others by showing them the truth in a form they can understand.” He goes on to place this insight in the context of “transcendence,” realizing that the *ultimate* expression of truth is made to God, and thus is an act of worship and of love. Divine liturgy brings the educational process to fulfilment: it is, in Caldecott’s words, “the consummation of education,” for all worldly study, as the author quotes Simone Weil, is really “a stretching of the soul towards prayer.”

Stratford Caldecott has produced an admirable book which offers many theological insights as well as practical suggestions. He has a rare capacity to convey complex truths in simple and elegant language, achieving a nice blend of theoretical principles, concrete examples and judicious quotations.

His invocation of the word “beauty” in the title of this volume on the *Trivium*—as in his earlier book on the *Quadrivium*—makes clear how profoundly “an education for freedom” (a “liberal”

education) is bound up with transcendence, and it only through a recovery of the Transcendentals, especially the neglected one of Beauty, that the mind and heart of our culture can be liberated from the cell of secularism in which they are now imprisoned.

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*Explorations in the Theology
of Benedict XVI*

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On page 24, Saint Augustine’s *crede, ut intelligas* (“Believe so that you may understand”) is rendered *credo ut intelligas* (“I believe so that you may understand”).¹ Serendipitously, the misprint captures something of the theological enterprise of Pope Benedict, and of the book itself. The theologian’s own *credo* shines through his writings to express and confirm the faith of the ordinary believer. The