

The Heart of the Trivium: A Review of Stratford Caldecott's *Beauty in the Word*

by Peter B. Hansen, Annapolis Christian Academy

In 1999, Stratford Caldecott emerged as a unique voice in classical Christian education with his timely meditations on the oft-neglected subjects of the Quadrivium in *Beauty for Truth's Sake*. Following a similar blueprint, Caldecott turns his contemplative powers to the theo-philosophical nature of language and takes the reader on a journey into the heart of the Trivium in his most recent *Beauty in the Word: Rethinking the Foundations of Education*.

While writing within a distinctively Roman Catholic tradition, ACCS members and classical Christian education aficionados of all stripes will find much to like in Caldecott's latest effort. While not completely devoid of practical insight, Caldecott takes a more theological and philosophical approach, digging deep to uncover the theoretical foundations of the Trivium as the arts of freedom and humanity. To quote Caldecott: "The central idea of the present book is very simple....It is about how we become more human (and therefore more free, in the truest sense of that word)" (11–12).

So, exactly how does the Trivium make us more human? The value of Caldecott's book lies in his ability to unpack the basic insight that the Trivium arts, working in harmony, are the means by which humanity rises to the contemplation of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty which are the essence of reality and the

hallmark of the imago Dei in us.

Taking sides with the Platonic-Augustinian tradition, Caldecott associates grammar with memory

hearing rather than resorting to the laptop or sound recording" (50).

Whereas grammar is concerned with "reading" or

Beauty in the Word: Rethinking the Foundations of Education

by Stratford Caldecott

Tacoma, WA: Angelico Press, 2012, 178 pages, \$14.95.

(*anamnesis*), that feature of human consciousness that enables us to fill a word with meaning by "remembering" in a flash of intuition the being of the thing itself. In this context, Caldecott offers encouraging insights for modern classical educators resisting the "twenty-first-century school" obsession with electronic gadgetry in every classroom: "Our first educational challenge is to counter the corrosive effect of technology on the traditions that nourish our humanity by *anamnesis*. If the spirit of tradition is to be preserved and revived, liturgy is going to be the key, for this is the school of memory . . ." (48). Defending the art of memory, Caldecott goes on to write, "The lessons for education are clear: reliance on computers is dangerous, and there is a case for banning them altogether from certain stages of the educational process, encouraging students to memorize what they need, and to analyze and take notes based on their own remembering and

"interpreting" reality and is tied up with memory, dialectic is associated with analyzing and discerning the truth of reality and is connected primarily with thought. For proper functioning, dialectic must be grounded in grammar and must teach students to think things out for themselves and to bring order and coherence to their view of the world. This is best accomplished through an informal dialogical approach to learning that involves discussion, debate, questioning, and critical conversation. Caldecott rightly understands that the entire crisis of our modern educational philosophy is the abandonment of the *logos* of the Trivium in favor of epistemological eclecticism which results in a lack of concern for coherent thought. Dialectics is a liberal art because clear thinking is one requisite for freedom and it aids us in our search for truth which keeps us sane by always bringing us back to reality.

Having moved from remembering reality (grammar) through ordering it properly (dialectic), Caldecott goes on to explore how we talk about reality to others and how the truth of

Peter Hansen is the head of Annapolis Christian Academy in Corpus Christi, Texas, an ACCS-accredited school. Learn more at <http://www.annapolischristianacademy.com/default.aspx>.

The Heart of the Trivium . . .

reality radiates through us to other human beings. In contrast to classical sophistry and postmodern educational philosophy, rhetoric in the classical Trivium is not about our will to power, it is about the freedom of others: “The essence of Rhetoric—which is not a set of techniques to impress (oratory, eloquence), nor a means of manipulating the will and emotions of others (sophistry, advertising), is rather a way of liberating the freedom of others by showing them the truth in a form they can understand”(92). While this is true for anyone seeking to practice the true art of rhetoric, it is especially true for the classical Christian educator. Following Augustine’s treatment of rhetoric in chapter four of *De Doctrina*, Caldecott emphasizes the role rhetoric plays in the life of a teacher who is trying to persuade students to the Good, the True,

and the Beautiful. In this context he emphasizes the importance of “opening up the heart” and allowing “the life that is within it to flow through words and gestures into the other person”(85). In solidarity with Quintilian’s definition of the rhetor as a “good man speaking well,” Caldecott also stresses the importance of ethos for the communicator (and I would also add for the headmaster of a classical Christian school): “You cannot communicate a truth that has not changed you. You cannot *build a community* on a truth that has not been incorporated into you, making you the kind of person you are. The person is, to some extent, the message”(86).

Underneath and throughout Caldecott’s analysis of the Trivium is a profound meditation in Trinitarian theology. The ultimate reason why the Trivium makes us more human is that we are the

created image of an uncreated Trinitarian archetype. Space does not allow me to explore this thought further, but I found Caldecott’s treatment of this concept along with his treatment of worship as the *telos* of education to be very interesting aspects of the book.

Though slim (only 178 pages from cover to cover), *Beauty in the Word* is packed with interesting insights and things that make you go “hmmm.” At times Caldecott seems to wander in a disjointed way, indulging theological and philosophical rabbit trails that seem only distantly related to his topic. But perseverance pays off for the reader as he (usually) manages to connect the dots and the result (for me at least) was a satisfying and refreshing wholeness of vision. The springs run deep and the water is cool and clean. I recommend a draught for those thirsty few.