Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon*: A Protestant Appropriation

by Gregory Soderberg

Out of all the sciences above named, however, the ancients, in their studies, especially selected seven to be mastered by those who were to be educated. These seven they considered so to excel all the rest in usefulness that anyone who had been thoroughly schooled in them might afterward come to a knowledge of the others by his own inquiry and effort rather than by listening to a teacher. For these, one might say, constitute the best instruments, the best rudiments, by which the way is prepared for the mind's complete knowledge of philosophic truth. Therefore they are called by the name trivium and quadrivium, because by them, as by certain ways (viae), a quick mind enters into the secret places of wisdom.[1]

This is one of the many jewels in Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon: De studio legendi* (On the Study of Reading), a twelfth-century work on theology and the liberal arts that marks a true high point in medieval thought. Hugh drew on the vast resources of the ancient world and his Christian fathers in the faith as he discussed the various divisions of human knowledge.[2] His work reads like a card catalogue,[3] and while his categories are suspiciously Platonic and Aristotelian, his tome stands as a testimony to the immense learning and theo-centricity that characterized the medieval age.

The *Didascalicon* does not address educational theory or pedagogy as we think of the terms. His work is a map to guide the earnest student on an ever-ascending path up to conformity to the Divine Likeness: "This, then, is what the arts are concerned with, this is what they intend, namely, to restore within us the divine likeness."[4]

The observant reader will have noticed an echo of Dorothy Sayers in the first-quoted passage (or rather a voice Sayers was echoing): "For the sole end is simply this: to teach men how to learn for themselves; and whatever instruction fails to do this is effort spent in vain."[5]

It is unfortunate that Sayers did not footnote her classic essay. Perhaps she had this very passage from Hugh in mind. Then again, perhaps it is best that Sayers left us to dig through the thick layers of medieval thought for ourselves. It is the role of a miner that I wish to play in this foray into the *Didascalicon*. I sometimes feel that we in the Christian classical movement are all tunnelling along through forgotten corridors and deserted halls. And so I have dug up Hugh of St. Victor and hold him up to the light for all to see. He does have some blemishes, indeed some cracks, but the light still dances splendidly in his words.

As I turn the *Didascalicon* over in my hands, polishing here and marvelling there, I will be simultaneously *appreciating* and *appropriating*. I struggled with both of these terms in choosing my title, but I feel that "appropriation" is the more Biblical, and the most medieval, of the two. If something is worth appropriating, then it is first worth appreciating. And as Hugh

1. Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon*, ed. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia UP, 1961), 87.

2. He writes, "In this little work I have designed to inquire only into the divisions and the names of things, so that the reader might thereby be established in some beginning of knowledge merely," 80.

3. I am indebted to C.S. Lewis: "At his most characteristic, medieval man was not a dreamer nor a wanderer. He was an organizer, a codifier, a builder of systems . . . . There was nothing medieval people liked better, or did better, than sorting out and tidying up. Of all our modern inventions I suspect that they would most have admired the card index," in *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1964), 10.

4. *Didascalicon*, 62.

5. Dorothy Sayers, "The Lost Tools of Learning," reprinted in Douglas Wilson, *Rediscovering the Lost Tools of Learning* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 164.

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appropriated Quintillian, Plato, Cassiodorus, and Boethius, I will appropriate him from a Protestant perspective, and endeavor to draw conclusions that would shed a little more light in this particular corridor of the medieval world. I hope that my conclusions will specifically benefit those involved in the revival of classical Christian education.

Wisdom and the Restoration of the *Imago Dei*

"Not knowing and not wishing to know are far different things. Not knowing, to be sure, springs from weakness; but contempt of knowledge springs from a wicked will."[6] So begins the *Didascalicon*. With a typical medieval fascination for naming, Hugh prepares to take his readers through a brief summary of human knowledge. There are two ways to acquire knowledge: reading and meditation. Hugh is concerned, primarily, with teaching students to *read*. Three things are necessary in reading: (1) what to read, (2) in what order to read, (3) in what manner to read. Hugh divides his book into two parts. The first is concerned with the "reader of the arts," and the second with "the reader of the Sacred Scripture."

6. *Didascalicon*, 43.

But why read? Is this not the perennial question? It is certainly one I've encountered more than once in my teaching career: "But, Mr. Soderberg, why are we reading/studying/learning (you fill in the blank) ?" This is not the ancient question of why we Christians are reading pagan authors, or why we are reading witch-filled Narnia stories. For Hugh, the question of why one would want to read great books was nonexistent. Hugh assumed that his readers (unless they were lazy) would *want* to read classical literature and, more importantly, the Bible.

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Hugh's directions on reading flow out of his Christian worldview. In discussing man, he writes: "In man are two things—the good and the evil . . . The good . . . requires to be restored by active effort. The evil . . . requires to be removed, or . . . at least to be alleviated through the application of a remedy. This is our entire task—the restoration of our nature and the removal of our deficiency."[7]

7. Ibid., 52.

Hugh's starting point sets him apart from other medieval thinkers like William of Conches, who began his commentary on Boethius' *De consolatione philosophiae* with "natural knowledge" (*scientia*) and proceeds to parse the various parts of knowledge. William equates "philosophy" with "wisdom" and finds the difference between the two only in etymology. One is a Greek word, and the other Latin, but beyond that, they both describe the realm of man's reason and knowledge.

As the translator and editor of the *Didascalicon*, Jerome Taylor notes in his introduction, "From such naturalistic rationalism Hugh's thought is poles apart. For Hugh, Wisdom is the second person of the trinitarian Godhead, and philosophy is pursuit of that Wisdom."[8] William of Conche's starting point, then, is the autonomous realm of reason; whereas Hugh begins with a discussion of Wisdom, which he later brings into a more trinitarian context:

> *This, then, is what the arts are concerned with, this is what they intend, namely, to restore within us the divine likeness, a likeness which to us is a form but to God is his*

8. Ibid., 17.

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> *nature. The more we are conformed to the divine nature, the more do we possess Wisdom, for then there begins to shine forth again in us what has forever existed in the divine Image or Pattern, coming and going in us but standing changeless in God.*[9]

The end (*telos*) of reading, therefore, is nothing less that the restoration of the *imago dei*.

The Classical Tradition

The *Didascalicon* stands squarely in the classical tradition. It is not a medieval treatise on how to teach the classics or the trivium, but a work following in the tradition of Christian didactic (didascalic) literature which, "begins with Augustine and continues through Boethius, Cassiodorus, Isidore of Seville, Bede, Alcuin, Rhabanus Maurus, and the late Carolingian masters, including John the Scot."[10]

He was most definitely not operating in a historical vacuum. One thinks even further into antiquity to Quintillian, that master of rhetoric, whose *Institutio Oratoria* is a far-ranging tome on the mechanics and philosophy of rhetoric. But it is no mere handbook. It is a program for life.

Quintillian writes: "I on the other hand hold that the art of oratory includes all that is essential for the training of an orator, and that it is impossible to reach the summit in any subject unless we have first passed through all the elementary stages. I shall not therefore refuse to stoop to the consideration of those minor details, neglect of which may result in there being no opportunity for more important things, and propose to mould the studies of my orator from infancy . . ."[11] Quintillian is not interested in one rhetoric course sometime in high school or college. He is writing about the inculcation of a rhetorical *worldview*.[12]

Quintillian is not interested in one rhetoric course sometime in high school or college. He is writing about the inculcation of a rhetorical worldview.

The medieval didacticists imitated Quintillian in the *scope* of their works. To speak of one thing, they realized, is to speak of all things. One cannot simply talk about mathematics without relation to the "music of the human body," the nine openings in the human body, and the four progressions of the soul. Of course, one simply *must* mention what Boethius or Capella said about the matter, and before we know it, we've wandered into a Platonic theory of the soul and a theory of epistemology. The medievals understood that knowledge cannot be compartmentalized. In giving instruction to young readers, they were laying out a project for a *lifetime of study*.

Cassiodorus follows Quintillian as he sets forth a program for the training of a monk, which in the medieval world was synonymous with a learned and well-read Christian. He summarizes "Divine and Secular Letters" as he presents his own reading plan for the monks in his scrip-

9. Ibid., 61.

10. Taylor, "Introduction" to *Didascalicon*, 3.

11. Quintillian, *Institutio Oratoria*, trans. H. E. Butler (London: Harvard UP, 1920), I.Pr.3-5.

12. Quintillian quotes Cicero: "In my opinion no one can be an absolutely perfect orator unless he has acquired a knowledge of all important subjects and arts." II.xxi.14-17.

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torium: "I was driven by divine charity to this device, namely, in the place of a teacher to prepare for you under the Lord's guidance these introductory books; through which, in my opinion, the unbroken line of Divine Scriptures and the compendious knowledge of secular letters might with the Lord's beneficence be related . . . since through them one learns the indicated origin of both the salvation of the soul and secular knowledge."[13]

Cassiodorus is an excellent early example of how Christians should appropriate the classics (in whatever field). In effect, he shows us how to plunder the pagans. Reading pagan authors is valuable, he and the other medieval didacticists argue, but reading does not stop there. We must read *beyond* the pagans as we read the Scriptures.

As Augustine put it, "still we ought not to give up music because of the superstition of the heathen, if we can derive anything from it that is of use for the understanding of Holy Scripture . . . Nay, but let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master; and while he recognizes and acknowledges the truth, even in their religious literature, let him reject the figments of superstition."[14] Hugh follows in Augustine's wake in one of the most powerful metaphors in the *Didascalicon*: "The writings of philosophers, like a whitewashed wall of clay, boast an attractive surface all shining with eloquence; but if sometimes they hold forth to us a semblance of truth, nevertheless, by mixing falsehoods with it, they conceal the clay of error, as it were, under an over-spread coat of color. The Sacred Scriptures, on the other hand, are most fittingly likened to a honeycomb, for while in the simplicity of their language they seem dry, within they are filled with sweetness."[15]

Medieval Trivial Pursuit

The medievals were in love with naming the world. Most of the time, they simply repeated the labels and appelations of the classical authors, but they were so enraptured by the neatness of tidy divisions and exact terms, that we may indulge them. Hugh immediately begins cutting away in the *Didascalicon*, and does not finish until he has left the world in a thousand pieces. He leaves us to put the jigsaw puzzle back together again.

He, like most medievals, was in love with numbers. There are three powers of the soul, three manners of things, three works, four progressions of the soul, four quadrivial arts, four parts of arithmetic, three parts of music, three parts of geometry, seven sciences, and so forth. It is important to realize that the medievals believed they were simply discovering the divine order inherent in creation. God, the Ultimate Mathematician, had placed numerous correspondences and patterns in the world, and it is our job to see and order them.

When Hugh finally begins to discuss the trivium and quadrivium, he has established the following divisions among the arts:

- Philosophy
  - Theoretical
    - Theology
    - Physics
    - Mathematics
      - Arithmetic
      - Music
      - Geometry
      - Astronomy
  - Practical
    - Solitary
    - Private
    - Public
  - Mechanical
    - Fabric making
    - Armament
    - Commerce
    - Agriculture
    - Hunting
    - Medicine
    - Theatrics

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13. Cassiodorus Senator, *An Introduction to Divine and Human Readings*, trans. Leslie Weber Jones, (New York: Columbia UP, 1946), 68.

14. *On Christian Doctrine* in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 646.

15. *Didascalicon*, 102.

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Logical
Grammar
Argument
Demonstration
Probable Argument
Dialectic
Rhetoric
Sophistic

Notice first that nothing is too trivial to be included in Hugh's grand summary of the arts. Hunting, fishing, and geometry, how marvelous is man's ingenuity! Rather, how marvelous is the world which God created, and we have discovered bit by bit. There are no knowledge-bytes in the medieval worldview, but a definite sense of building, block by block, a marvelous edifice of human understanding.

The trivium is certainly included in this structure. Hugh summarizes the trivium neatly: "Grammar is knowledge of how to speak without error; dialectic is clear-sighted argument which separates the true from the false; rhetoric is the discipline of persuading to every suitable thing."[16] He also discusses the quadrivium at length.

But the trivium and quadrivium are not Hugh's concerns in the *Didascalicon*. For him, the primary distinctions are the four branches of knowledge: theoretical, practical, mechanical, and logical. Within these genera, Hugh believes, all aspects of human art find their proper place.

Platonizing and Theologizing

It is at this point that a Protestant appropriation will part company with Hugh. He worries that readers will object to his placement of "food and drink" under the art of Medicine, while he earlier placed them under Hunting. Hugh's world is entirely too tidy. The medievals erred in multiplying scholastic distinctions. Underlying Hugh's entire project, we will find a subtle Platonism. Thus he states that only *theoretical* knowledge (theology, mathematics, physics) can rightly be called *wisdom*, because "it studies the truth of things."[17] Solomon would have none of this. Undoubtedly wisdom has theoretical dimensions, but others have convincingly argued that the biblical concept of wisdom is much more organic and earthy. Is it any wonder that the wisest men who walked the earth (Christ and Solomon) left us words about plowing, sowing, fishing, making love, and the endless cycles of seasons? Whether knowingly or not, the medievals must have felt the tension between their intellectualistic version of the faith and the biblical texts, and so turned the Song of Solomon into a grand allegory (to take the most notorious example).

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As a corrolary of this incipient Platonism, we find in Hugh a *denigration of the imagination*. After relating how the soul must "degenerate" through the process of contact with "bodily images," he states, "Imagination, however, is sensuous memory made up of the traces of corporeal objects inhering in the mind; it possesses in itself nothing certain as a source of knowledge."[18] The Christian reader, then, must ascend out of the muck of imagination and bodily images into some sort of Platonic stratosphere. For Hugh, "understanding is pure and certain knowledge of the sole principles of things—namely, of God, of ideas, and of prime matter, and of incorporeal substances."[19]

To Hugh's credit, he saw

16. Ibid., 82.
17. Ibid., 73.
18. Ibid., 67.
19. Ibid., 66.

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himself as consistently Christian, but he was juggling chainsaws, and cut off more than one finger in the process. As Protestants, we must reject any hint of Platonism which, in education, tends to show up in logic stage. (One could argue that the medievals remained primarily at the logic stage in philosophy and theology. However, until we can write *poetry* like they did, we should keep our mouths shut and learn a lesson or two). While we read Hugh in his more Platonic moments, we must remember that he saw his readers progressing through stages of knowledge and wisdom that mirrored God's wisdom and knowledge. Though his language is Platonic, his worldview is *theocentric*.

Hugh is not only concerned with "Secular Letters." That is merely groundwork to prepare us to study "Sacred Letters." There are three types of men who read the Scriptures: those who seek riches or honor and those who delight in the "marvels" of Scripture, and the third group who read the Scriptures, "so that they may forthrightly demolish enemies of the truth, teach those less well informed, recognize the path of truth more perfectly themselves, and understanding the hidden things of God more deeply, love them more intently."[20] It is this sort of reader that Hugh wished his readers to be, and it is this sort of reader that Hugh himself strove to be.

To the patient and persevering reader, the *Didascalicon* offers us a window into the medieval mind, and through that mind, a vista into the vast learning of antiquity. To those of us dedicated to "rebuilding the ruins" and "recovering the lost tools of learning," surely we should be eager to learn from one who was himself engaged in the same task. One day, may our children's children say of us as Hugh said of those who study Scripture "precisely": "Surely the devotion of these persons deserves praise and is worthy of imitation."[21]

Now, therefore, let us ask Wisdom that it may deign to shine in our hearts and to cast light upon its paths for us, that it may bring us "to its pure and fleshless feast."[22]

20. Ibid., 134.

21. Ibid., 134.

22. Ibid., 151. Fittingly, Hugh ends his book with a quotation from the Latin *Asclepius*, part of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Nothing was beyond Christianization for the medievals!

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Book Review: Protocol Matters

Although Sandra Boswell's book, *Protocol Matters*, is a double entendre, it's not one with a risqué or indelicate meaning in either sense. In fact, both meanings are precisely germane. Protocol, how one conducts oneself in the company of others, does indeed matter, it is important. Also, the book is a compendium of matters or issues about establishing a "protocol" or social event for the purpose of instructing students in proper etiquette and customs.

Proper etiquette is another means of demonstrating love through our actions. Knowing the proper thing to do in a wide variety of social situations can help put others at ease as well as ourselves. Boswell has done an outstanding job of addressing the vast array of potential social issues that most people encounter in life, and provides explicit directions on how to navigate each of them.

Boswell begins by addressing protocol training, explaining what it is and why it is important. She continues by emphasizing how to teach protocol in the home and ultimately how to establish a protocol training program at school that addresses students in an age-appropriate fashion (a la trivium).

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