

William Thompson

Recommended Reading

Taking the Occasion, by Dan Brown (Ivan R. Dee \$22.50)

In 1978, while browsing through the poetry section in an Atlanta bookstore, I opened a volume called *Tenebrae*, by somebody named Geoffrey Hill. My eyes landed first on these lines

empiness ever thronging
untenable belonging
how long until this longing
end in unending song

and ever since I have held a special admiration for poets in whose hands the short line really sings. But, as I was to learn, such poets are not easy to find.

These days, I do most of my browsing online, at sites like Lisa Russ Spaar's *Arts and Academe*, a poetry blog for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, where in 2011 she featured this poem by one Dan Brown:

The Birth of God

It happened near Lascaux
Millions of dawns ago.
For dawn it was,
Infusing radiance
And cuing avians
The way it does,

That saw the two of them
(Odds are a her and him,
Though maybe not)
Emerging from the mouth
Of a cave a couple south
Of the one that's got

All that painted fauna
All but snorting on a
Wall. That is
To say, from the mouth of a cave
Unconsecrated save
By the sighs and cries

Of the night just past. The pair
Has borne the bliss they share
Out into the bright.
Where silently they stand
Thanking, hand in hand
Before the light.

Their gratitude is truly
New beneath the duly
Erupting sun.
A gratitude that so
Wants a place to go
It authors one.

Here was a poet with a gift more valuable than skill, whose singing trimeters and dimeters lured me into the world of the poem before I had any inclination to admire his technique.

Winner of the New Criterion Poetry Prize for 2008, *Taking the Occasion* sustains its melodic clarity from start to finish. (It was not much of a surprise to learn that Brown studied musicology in graduate school or that he taught music theory at Cornell and Dartmouth. He has also

authored an online book devoted to the works of J.S. Bach.)
But one also encounters in Brown's good-humored poems a
clear and clarifying moral sense, a generosity of spirit:

**On the Audience's Standing
for the Hallelujah Chorus**

A vote for the tradition
Least worthy to be lost
Might go to this: an instance
More visible than most
Of bowing (in our rising)
To the power of the great.
One of those subjections
That only elevate.

Yes, poetry can still delight *and* instruct — and Brown is an
unusually talented but also a *wise* poet. These are reasons
enough to turn again and again to *Taking the Occasion*.