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Rhapsodist 1789

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THE RHAPSODIST

1789

When he was eighteen years old Brown made his first appearance as a prose writer with The Rhapsodist, the third volume of which was published in the Columbian Magazine, then edited by the very distinguished Alexander J. Dallas. The four instalments appeared in the numbers for August, September, October and November 1789, were signed respectively by the initials B.R.O.W.--so that if there had been a fifth we should expect it to be signed N.--and were numbered I to IV.

When they were written is not known. "To Correspondents" of the August number says "We thank the Rhapsodist, and solicit the continuance of his essays" and the publication of the first instalment in the same number would indicate it was sent in during July and may have been written no earlier. It has been said[1] the essays were read at his club previous to publication--not improbable because characteristic of Brown if actual--but the club is not identified and any such reading does not imply they were all written before being offered for publication to the periodical. So far as we know they are his sole contribution.

1 F.L.Pattee: Introduction to Wieland New York (1926) p.xiii.

The work presents a true idea of Brown's mental state at the probable time of composition and opens as follows:

> "In commencing a work of this kind, it has always been usual to give the reader some acquaintance with the person of the author, and to inform him respecting the cause of his thus publishing his lucubrations1 to the world; but it has not, I think, been considered as necessary, that the account thus given, should exactly correspond with the truth. Where the case is otherwise, an author would find a disadvantage in disclosing his real situation, not to be recompensed by any fame or reputation he might derive from his writings. For my part, were I to comply with the uniform example of my predecessors, I should, I frankly confess, be under the necessity of somewhat disguising the truth, but as I intend that the sincerity of my character shall be the principal characteristic of these papers: the public will excuse me in dispensing with a rule, which owes its sole authority to custom, without any foundation in reason. It is not my intention to be totally concealed from view, I shall, from time to time, as occasion requires, give such useful hints, and seasonable information of the family, age,2 and pursuits of the author, as I doubt not, will fully gratify the inquisitive disposition of the reader; but on such occasions, I shall not make use of my privilege as an anonymous writer, and represent to him, any facts or circumstances which are not strictly true."

1 A favorite legal word of Brown's.
2 It should be noted that the age of the author is brought out by the correspondent. Brown, as the Rhapsodist, gave none of the details here promised save his occupation.

After some consideration of an author's honesty Brown's motive in writing is represented as follows:

> "I venture to intrude myself upon the public, not in the fond expectation of contributing a more than ordinary share of amusement or instruction to the common stock. My ambition has already devoted me to the service of my country, and the acquisition of true glory, but I am too well acquainted with my own deficiencies, to hope for fame in this capacity. If my continual struggle shall at length raise me to a level of mediocrity, and my readers expect not the eccentric genius of a higher place, I shall be perfectly satisfied."

That is hardly the whole truth as we know it. Just what he meant by service to his country and true glory ~~may become~~ is made clear ~~later when~~ in his 28 November 1794 letter to Dunlap, where he says "It used to be a favorite maxim with me that the genius of a poet should be sacred to the glory of his country."

The title chosen is sensational. If he had so many, probably not one in a thousand of his readers knew the meaning of the word; even to-day the pronunciation is the same. Brown became acquainted with R. J. Sullivan's Views of Nature in 1796, so it is not at all unlikely that he may have derived his title from Sullivan's Philosophical Rhapsodies (three volumes London 1784-5). The book is just the sort of thing he liked, a historical and ethnological miscellany of orientalia, oddities of Greece, Rome, most of Europe and an occasional touch of early America. However, if Brown read more than the title he never used any thing else from it.

The following definition[x] ~~also shows his intention~~ more ~~than it~~ correctly defines than most dictionaries do.

> "A rhapsodist is one who delivers the sentiments suggested by the moment in artless and unpremeditated language. His reasoning is always introduced to illustrate the circumstance, and the fact to confirm the rasoning. He pours forth the effusions of a sprightly fancy, and describes the devious wanderings of a quick but thoughtful mind; But he is equally remote from the giddy raptures of enthusiasm, and the sober didactic strain of dull philosophy; from a hurry of thought arises carelessness and obscurity of composition; these are defects perhaps pardonable in a professed rhapsody, but the rhapsodist will not avail himself of the privilege; he may be remarkable for sudden transitions in his d subjects, and hasty

x De Quincey, when in a whimsical frame of mind, might argue that rhaps means needle and odist means poet so that a rhapsodist must ~~might~~ be a tailor-poet who would give us rather irregular feet in his poems.

~~1 The Oxford Dictionary defines it as "a collector of literary pieces." Brown thus uses the word in the obsolete sense as used by his namesake Sir Thomas Browne. The title was afterwards used for some essays in verse and prose in the Rural Visiter Burlington, N.J., beginning 25 February 1811.~~

> discussions,but not for an affected singularity in his opinions,or an absurd incoherence of thought. In short he will write as he speaks,and converse with his reader not as an author,but as a man."

The essay is ~~profuse in~~ stream with autobiographical material though the details are so well woven into the work that they would escape ~~any~~ most readers ~~un~~acquainted with Brown's life.

The most prominent of the ~~autobiographical~~ touches are the repeated references to his ambition as a poet which ~~he says~~ was "smothered in the depth of rudeness." He says the fatal vengeance of fortune was the cause of the destruction of his hopes and he wishes to relieve himself from the "dull detail of sorrows." Like all authors who have their spurs to win he was actually compelled to explain to the mob what he had meant when he had formerly claimed to have poetic genius. He says

> "A genius for poetry or science is little more than an inclination to excell in that particular department. With whatever defects of heart or understanding,therefore,it may be accompanied, some indulgence should be allowed to the noblest infirmity of human minds."

But no indulgence is ever given by the world to those who pretend to the heights of fame,so that he had to add that

> "The poet...is not a distinct person from the rhapsodist."

Later, he represents himself as boarding at some house on the banks of the Ohio, five miles from civilization, where he lived in solitude, hermit-like, when Thomson the waggoner brought from Philadelphia the letter which he inserts as a part of the structure of the essay. At the same time he says

> "I viewed mankind at a distance, and contemplated the fabric of human nature as it appears in a book."

which echoes the closing of his 1788 letter to Wilkins.

Number II gives us a few more autobiographic touches.

> "The Rhapsodist, though he not infrequently derives half the materials of his thoughts from an intimate acquaintance with the world, is an enemy to conversation.[1] It

1 This is echoed in Wilkins' Columbian Observer essay XII, June 1791, pp. 300-2.

is indeed, in his fondness for solitude, that the singularity of his character principally consists. He loves to converse with beings of his own creation, and every personage, and every scene, is described with a pencil dipt in the colors of imagination. To his strong and vivid fancy, there is scarcely a piece of mere unanimated matter existing in the universe. His presence inspires, being, instinct, and reason into every object, real or imagined, and the air, the water and the woods, wherever he directs his steps, are thronged with innumerable inhabitants.....

~~Also,~~

"The life of the rhapsodist is literally a dream....he... ~~industriously avoids the numerous circle, and the frequent converse; and~~ is always to be found in the deepest recesses of his garden, or retired to muse and meditate in his chamber. In this situation he is naturally induced to solicit an acquaintance with the beings of an higher order. An entire faith in the reality of witches and apparitions may commonly be traced to its true source, in the warmth of the passions, in the strength and fertility of the fancy. The Rhapsodist is an hearty convert to the most extravagant of such opinions: but his ideas upon this subject are not tinged with the melancholy gloom of superstition. ~~He believes it derogatory to the majesty of the supreme being~~.

This ~~idea of the author's~~ belief in witchcraft and apparitions is an interesting ~~point~~ conversion when we ~~shall see~~ recall that the quasi-supernatural was to become the basis of some of his ~~future~~ works, and to enter (as a seductive echo) almost everything he wrote.

That Brown was (at this early age) a nature lover is to be ~~found~~ seen here also.

"Nature is the mistress of his affections, in the contemplation of whose charms he is never wearied....I speak it with confidence, inspired by invariable experience. .... ~~That~~ The rhapsodist ~~(a term nearly of the same import, as my reader will perceive, with castle builder)~~ would not exchange the solitary pleasures of his garden, and his chamber for the joys that encircle the imperial diadem."

This might be supplemented by the statement in number III that he had ~~avoided stepping on~~ refused to kill a cockroach and had set (free) trapped a mouse ~~caught in a trap.~~

In number III we find other autobiographic material.

> "I did not consume the flower of my days in abstracted speculation only... ~~I viewed mankind at a distance, and contemplated the fabric of human nature as it appears in a book.~~ I was thoroughly conversant with the manners, literature, and politics, of ancient and modern times, before I left my retreat. But there is an immense difference between the scenes of fancy and reality, tho' I was well acquainted with the economy of European cities, and indeed had frequently traversed in idea 1 the whole extent of the habitable globe from the western extremity of America to the isles of Japan. Though I have alternately spent my life in the wilds of Columbian woods, and in the seraglios of the East. In short, tho' I had gained that universal knowledge which may be gleaned from ten years of leisure, and the inexhaustible sources of information which a well chosen library contained, I was at last deceived by the warmth of my imagination; and felt how unavailing is knowledge unless it be derived from the wholesome precepts of experience."

The grotto of the author we shall find is ~~one~~ another particular of the accessories that ~~particularly~~ so powerfully appealed to Brown ~~and~~ ~~author~~ it appears in several of his works.

In the supposed letter to the rhapsodist we find this hopeful outlook of the young author.

> "No one, I trust, will accuse me of flattery, when I frankly declare my opinion, that I am now addressing a youth of amiable disposition, and of talents not inferior to his cotemporaries: that his mind is fitted to a higher station, than that which he at present occupies, and, in spite of time and accident, 2 will one day raise him to his proper level."

~~His hopes are further detailed~~.

> "Think not that my vanity aspires to unusual excellence in point of composition. I desire to differ from my brother authors of the monthly, weekly, or diurnal species--

1 By aid of his maps.
2 ~~Evidently the inclination to~~ consumption ~~was~~ could have been not a menace at this time.

> rather in kind,than in degree. Such ambition is surely laudible,and the want of it is doubtless a defect in whomsoever it appears. I love the pompous and the gay,the copious and diffuse in writing,nor can I be convinced merely by another's testimony,that any praises can be honestly conferred in those,however useful and edifying their instructions,whose words are few,and style compact. The pointed apothegm and sage remark,are productive of as little profit to my understanding,as pleasure to my ear;nor can I prevail on myself to treat with approbation or applause,an affected obscurity and studied brevity,though sanctioned by the venerable names of Montesquieu and Tacitus. Possibly the light of method and the vigor of conciseness,may always be denied to the writer who fondly admires,and assiduously imitates, the beautiful diffuseness and splendid luxuriance of Cicero--or the grave,melodious,and musical instructions of Socrates."

Two details are of peculiar interest to us in connection with his life. It would be an interesting thing if we could learn just who he refers to in I as the person whose personal experience had given him a prejudice against the name of Spectator. Possibly it was Wilkins but we have no proof to make it certain.

A possible reference to his brothers in trade may be found in the part where he says he had a supreme contempt for selling goods--for the name of "Retailer"--which to him recalled a despicable character. In this detail Brown was like most authors who are not business men--but few have his courage to express their opinions of tradesmen.

Those details are not only of value because of their possible

connection with actual individuals whom our author wished to ~~slap~~ inflate ~~at~~; but taken in connection with the references to his service to his country and true glory, which we may have been ~~suggested as~~ sarcasms, and the ~~anonymous~~ assumed character ~~and~~ with the concealed name, in the initials, they are ~~keys to~~ intimations to the ~~underlying~~ intention of the work. They show us the real Brown wounded, suffering, practically friendless, but full of playful fancy, hope and fight. If Wilkins was the ~~first~~ one discovered by the Spectator and one of his brothers the ~~second~~ Retailer they must have reddened to the neck when they saw themselves held up ~~to the~~ public as examples by the boy whom they thought defeated because he trembled under their merciless nagging. ~~Probably if Brown could have gone back to Proud's school and had them for schoolmates he would have soundly thrashed them.~~

The whole essay is an instance of the fact that Brown in his early days followed a model. ~~No doubt~~ he had been studying the Spectator. Later when the material for stories overwhelmed him he gave little time to perfecting ~~his~~ a style or literary structure by study and wrote ~~just~~ as his instinct guided him. ~~For labelling~~ The initials used with each instalment recall Addison's C.b.l.o as well as the reference to title above ~~there is~~ Rhapsodical life

~~The~~ two quoted phrases (p. 538 and 540) are ~~from his reading of~~ Milton's. "Beyond the visible diurnal

sphere" is from Paradise Lost (vii, 21) where it is "Within" — rather than "Beyond". "The bottom of this monstrous world" from Lycidas (158) should read the for this. In both cases the context is ~~predominantly~~ especially suitable or similar to Brown's position and thought as expressed in the Rhapsodist and time of his life about that time (1818); the former being one of Keats's best known ~~known~~ invocations, to this muse because of its "fit audience find, though few"; ~~with~~ the latter ~~poet latter~~ with its lament for the body perhaps tossed "beyond the stormy Hebrides" while "our frail thoughts dally with false surmise". Whatever we think of his own literary ability at this time we cannot deny his remarkable instinct for the great things of other authors.

For labelling purposes this work is a semi-autobiographic fictional essay. ~~In this case~~ The character assumed by Brown is ~~purely~~ really fictitious, for his definition of a rhapsodist is not ~~thorough~~ orthodox and the essays ~~that are called by this~~ so name are not to be classed as rhapsodical, except in ~~the~~ an obsolete sense of his namesake Sir Thomas Browne.

In so far as the details of the supposed rhapsodist are echoes of Brown's experience the work is autobiographic. The fictional ~~side~~ is not only evident in ~~its~~ the structure but besides the character of the writer there are at least three others ~~characters~~ whom we are compelled to consider as

purely fictitious. Thomson the waggoner who carried the letter to the rhapsodist and whose position of letter carrier we ~~will~~ shall later find in a Series of Original Letters as Mostyn, in Clara Howard as Godfrey Cartwright and in Jane Talbot as a postman, is one of them. Another, the landlady spoken of in number III, is a regular character in most of Brown's later fiction. The third is the correspondent who sends the letter to the rhapsodist and has so many of Brown's mannerisms that we are compelled to believe him to be only a part, and a defective part at best, of the mechanical structure of the essay.

In general the work must be looked on as an essay on rhapsodism, though ~~but~~ it is not alone that.

On the whole it is promising. The reflections ~~though~~ somewhat tedious as are philosophic, ~~in fact so much so that~~ have some of the linguistic charm of a young man though too youthful to be sufficiently agreeable for any but youth, nevertheless we believe the reader would not be able to guess the slight age of the writer if the correspondent had not suggested it. The style is, but not spasmodic with staccato sentences; ~~though it is~~ full of Latinisms. The dashes used at the end of some paragraphs of II may be ~~a~~ la indicating ellipses. ~~(illegible)~~

No II The supposed letter communicated to the author ~~is purely a fabrication and is cleverly worked up. It~~ probably portends the epistolary method of narration which we shall find him afterward using considerably.

~~(A)~~ II It is rather unfortunate, if at all a matter of luck, that he began publication with this sort of a thing. It would have been considerably if not most striking in his later days: as his première it gives little if any pleasure, it excites curiosity and disappoints it, indeed but it goes off like wet fireworks, suggestive only of what it might have been. ~~a~~ Brown ^Rhapsodist may claim unrestricted liberty of subject and handling but the writer who knows his business will be satisfied with the claim and proceed to practise the most precise planning — none of which Brown did and ~~probably~~ little of which he ^appreciated ~~understood~~ so early in his life. Dallas ~~may have~~ probably stopped it with III — he had plenty of reasons for doing so — but he might have been more patient, for from what he gave, with all its faults, its promise despite the "preciousness" should have been seen by the older man, especially in its manner rather than matter. ~~Apparently the~~ The editor ~~was~~ ^was unable to discover literary promise or he ~~would~~ ^would have encouraged him, if necessary, to have gone on; perhaps not with the Rhapsodist but certainly with studies of life and manners.

Brown's latent ability

How he ever missed the gem "This comes of learning" (in III, p. 599) is however a puzzle.

From the similarity of ideas treated ~~here and~~ by Wilkins in his
(1791) (1792) Rhapsodist
Observer and Trifles essays it is probable that the ~~work~~ had an
Brown's intellectual interests ran along the
influence on his legal friend. Their ~~minds were apparently simi-~~
same lines and — in the Trifles —
~~lar but~~ when we find the ideas and the clever initialled signatures

followed by Wilkins there seems to be but one conclusion--that
him after his
Brown stimulated ~~Wilkins~~ to ~~try his hand at~~ literary compositions
for publication. Whether the verses To Iris in the
1789
December number of the Columbian were due to Brown's
contact with Wilkins' own activity is not the least evident, ~~but~~
it is quite likely the ~~the~~ title was used for a series of
a years after Brown's death his
essays in verse and prose in the Rural Visiter,
Burlington, N.H., beginning 25 February 1811, but none
of Brown's matter was echoed.

former was the case.

The Rhapsodist[1] appeared to the editor ~~Dallas~~ as a cause for ~~Brown~~ the author to have strong claims to his gratitude ~~and~~[2] but Brown apparently never tried to collect the claim well deserves to be read As a part of Brown's biography it ~~if not for itself~~ but it has been unfairly left in obscurity, little more than ~~nothing but~~ its existence having been noticed by biographers ~~who did not bother to search for it in its periodical appearance.~~ It has never been reprinted. It is ~~at least~~ of importance as ~~being~~ the earliest known example of Brown's published prose ~~work~~ and though it shows him as an apprentice hand in literary work it is no mean effort for a boy of eighteen.

1 In connection with Brown's early hope for Franklin's patronage it is of interest to recall that Franklin's autobiography made its first American appearance in 1790-1 in the same periodical to which Brown contributed The Rhapsodist.

2 See refusal of the Speculatist in To Correspondents of the October Columbian Magazine.