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Humour is a much neglected aspect of the American literary tradition. The works of the American Renaissance especially are treated with the gravity befitting the foundation texts of the canon. The power of blackness that Harry Levin identified as a motivating force in the writings of Hawthorne and Melville has come to obliterate all other shades of the spectrum. Professor Bryant's book, then, appears at first to be a little off-beat. But after some thought I am sure all of us can think of at least a few passages in Melville's work that have raised a smile, if not a laugh. And then, after considering the subtle and knowledgeable discussion of humour in the Renaissance and Melville's place within that context, one must admit that Professor Bryant is right to claim a central role for humour in Melville's writing.

John Bryant's explicit argument is two-fold: first, he situates Melville's use of humour within the context of his contemporaries' practice. Here, the examples of Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe and T. B. Thorpe are considered in terms of inherited Old World forms of storytelling and New World innovations. Second, he offers "a definitive account of the comic as the shaping force of Melville's narrative voice throughout the major phase of his literary career." In this second part of the book Bryant devotes considerable space to extensive discussion of Typee, Moby Dick and The Confidence-Man. In one of the more interesting aspects of these chapters, Bryant draws out the implications of Melville's interest in the figure of the trickster/cosmopolitan which is implicit in the first two novels and only explicit in the latter.

The humorist Herman Melville who emerges from these pages is a man using laughter as a very serious strategy for stimulating thought. The romantic attempt to bring together word and thought, language and experience, is furthered by the capacity of comedy to engender what Bryant calls a "rhetoric of aesthetic repose." In texts like Typee, Moby Dick and The Confidence-Man Melville formulates a distinctively American comic aesthetic which is both of his time and a product of his place: a hybrid of the European picturesque and the native genre of the tall tale. Professor Bryant takes comedy seriously as a complex and sophisticated literary form that provides access to historical and cultural dimensions of the text that are neglected by a more sombre approach. Written in a lively and engaging style but incorporating an impressive degree of scholarly research, not only into the corpus of Melville scholarship but also the history and culture of the Renaissance, Melville and Repose is a major contribution to thought about the nature of America's first literary flowering.