

Henri Bergson (1859-1941)

It is unnatural for the American to ascribe a particular character and behavior to the residents of his own nation. The origins of Americans are famously diverse and in consequence the styles, attitudes, and expectable behaviors of Americans are open to the luck of historical development. The typical American does not exist, while in a sense the typical French man is at least a meaningful construct. The French man to whom this preface is devoted might be said to be brilliant but typically French. He is witty but at the same time he makes himself an unparalleled analyst of wit.

1859-1941, the dates of Bergson's life, encompass vast changes in the tenor of French cultural life. Across the arts new latitudes have been granted to freedom of expression, and at the same time to boldness in the analysis of those cultural trends of a time. For a long time, at least since the Renaissance, lights of French thought and expression, have been style-makers for Europe and to the culturally growing west. (One need not cast ahead into waters which brim with names like La Bruyere, La Fontaine, or Diderot. They set the stylish insights for the rest of the literary world.) Diderot, in his *Discours sur le comedien*, sets the boldness model by looking at the very essence, and scrutinizing the nature of the comic spirit, and joking at the degrees of duplicity necessary to carrying out the comic project. In this wide ranging *Discours sur le comedien*, Diderot steps onto the large theoretical stage later taken in England by George Meredith in his *Nature and Uses of the Comic Spirit*). Comedy, long seen as ancillary to tragedy, and less rich in its insight-yield, appears to enjoy many special privileges of its own.

In the midst of this brouhaha over the growingly modern implications of the meaning and uses of comedy, comes Henri Bergson, another brilliant student of the valences showing up in contemporary thought about the comic. Bergson was above all a philosopher, and addresses us here as a Chair of Greek and Roman Philosophy. In his teens he had been vocal for his materialism, a kind of hard-nosed Darwinism, from which he only gradually morphed toward a kind of philosophical narration which emerged in a wide variety of books--*Matter and Memory*, *Creative Evolution*--which brought him the Nobel Prize in 1927. In the work he developed here Bergson made every effort to blend his metaphysics with an empirical view of the everyday psychology of social interaction, emotionality and dislike. One might say that the theme concept of Bergson's early work is the mechanical, as it pairs off against the flexible characteristics of matter. The whole drama of the funny--the grotesque, the whimsical, the hilarious---is wrapped up in the interplays of our emotions as we scrutinize the interplay between the flexible and the sterner, the organic and the bumpy in our experience. Though this point yields a great simplification of Bergson's elaborated thoughts, Bergson makes all but a cosmology out of the simplest juxtapositions of situations common in life situations. A single example may suffice in the present instance. A man comes walking down the street, with an agile gait. Several individuals, who have been standing around watching him just as he approaches a banana peel, see him just as, he slips and falls, flat on his back. An uproar of laughter goes up. The conflict of flow with interruption is so abrupt, notes Bergson, that the outburst at what we have been taught to call the comical is irresistible.