

Miloš Ševčík

**Louis Cazamian's
Theory
of Humour**

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Preface

The theory of humour put forward by French historian and literary theorist Louis François Cazamian has so far escaped scholarly attention, in contrast to some of his writings on the history of English literature. Remarkably, this theory has not yet been examined systematically and in detail. Cazamian's thinking on the principles and the workings of humour is truly original and insightful, despite being inspired, as he admits, by Bergson's conception of the ridiculous and Bergson's remarks on humour itself. Cazamian drew attention to the paradoxical, complicated, ambiguous, and even contradictory effects of the particular type of comic linguistic transposition which is humour. In Cazamian's conception, humour acquires a noteworthy status as a specific comic phenomenon that nevertheless finds its place in the field of artistic creativity. The penetrating character of humour stems mainly from the ambiguity in which different and even contradictory reactions to reality are both rejected and emphasised. In the present monograph, I attempt to identify and interpret the motifs driving Cazamian's reflections on humour, noting their evolution over time. At the same time, however, I point to the possibility of revealing what is implicit in these considerations. I elaborate on these implications with an eye towards grasping the special critical impact of humour. In the monograph I show that the ambiguity in the nature of the reactions to reality occasioned by humorous transposition is reflected in the ambiguity of the critical impact of humour, which suppresses any simplistic, dogmatic or inattentive reactions to reality. This is based on the premise that such an examination of Cazamian's thought is fully in line with the thrust of his reflections and their meticulous character. At the same time, however, such an examination of Cazamian's writings on

the critical significance of humour is consistent with Cazamian's notion of humour as a form of art that revives our understanding of the uniqueness of things.

The monograph is based on the results of my research into Cazamian's conception of humour presented in several studies published in scholarly journals, to wit: "Bergsonismus Cazamianova pojetí humoru [The Bergsonism of Cazamian's Conception of Humour]", *Estetika* [Aesthetics] 44, nos. 1–4 (2007): 57–84; "Laskavost a hořkost humoru v úvahách Louise Cazamiana [The Goodwill and Bitterness of Humour in the Writings of Louis Cazamian]" *Filozofia* [Philosophy] 74, no. 10 (2019): 866–875; "Význam humoru v kontextu úvah Louise Cazamiana [The Importance of Humour in the Context of Louis Cazamian's Thinking]," *Filosofický časopis* [Philosophical Journal] 68, no. 3 (2020): 361–386; "Afnita laskavosti a humoru v úvahách Louise Cazamiana [The Affinity between Goodwill and Humour in the Thought of Louis Cazamian]," *Kultúrne dějiny* [Cultural History] 1 (2020): 104–121; "Both Artistic and Comic: The Status and Significance of Humour in the Context of Louis Cazamian's Writings", *European Journal of Humour Research* 9, no. 4 (2021), forthcoming. The monograph was made possible by the grant project GA18-15841S "Cazamian's Concept of Humour".

1. Introduction

This monograph is dedicated to an examination of Louis Cazamian's writings¹ on the nature of humour. First, I show how these writings tie into Bergson's theory of the comic as a contrast between life and automatism and into Bergson's remarks on humour as a special type of comic linguistic transposition as well. At the same time, however, I emphasize that Cazamian's thinking diverges from Bergson's conception of humour

1 Louis François Cazamian was born in 1877 in Saint Denis, Réunion, where he also spent his early childhood. In 1882, the Cazamian family moved to metropolitan France, making it possible for Louis – as well as his siblings – to receive an excellent education. Louis Cazamian first studied at the Lycée Henri IV, where Henri Bergson was working at the time, and then at the École normale supérieure between 1896 and 1900. In 1900, Louis Cazamian became a member of the Agrégation d'anglais. He taught first at the Lycée de Brest (1900) and later at the Lycée de Nevers (1903) and also became a fellow of the Fondation Thiers (1901–1903). In 1903 he also published his doctoral thesis, *Le roman social en Angleterre 1830–1850*. From 1904 onward, he lectured at the universities of Lyon and Bordeaux and then at the Sorbonne beginning in 1908. His book *Études de psychologie littéraire*, gathering together Cazamian's essays from previous years, was published in 1913. He was mobilized between 1915 and 1919; at the same time, however, he published the book *La Grand-Bretagne et la guerre* (1917). In 1919, Louis Cazamian became head of the English Studies Department at the Sorbonne, where he was appointed professor in 1921; eventually, he became professor of the Sorbonne's Department of British Modern Literature and Civilization. During this period he published several important works: *L'évolution psychologique et la littérature en Angleterre* (1920), *Histoire de littérature anglaise moderne* (together with Émile Legouis) (1924), *Ce qu'il faut connaître de l'âme anglaise* (1927) and *Criticism in the Making* (1929). A collection titled *Essais en deux langues*, comprising short works Cazamian wrote in the 1920s and 1930s, was published in 1938. For a long time, Cazamian worked on the preparation of one of his most famous publications, which was also the most frequently quoted of his writings, namely *The Development of English Humour* (first volume 1930; first and second volume 1952). However, he also directed his attention the topic of humour in other essays and books, particularly *Carlyle* (1932), *L'Humour anglais* (1942) and *L'Humour de Shakespeare* (1945). Louis Cazamian died in 1965. He is considered one of the most important French scholars of English studies of the early 20th century.

and leads to the creation of an original theory.² In this context, I point out that Bergson's remarks are notable for indicating what Bergson generally rejects regarding comic phenomena – namely, the connection between ridicule and sympathy. By contrast, this connection between the comic and sympathy as the ability to penetrate deeply into an individual's psychological reality is elaborated in Cazamian's theory of humour. Moreover, on the basis of this connection, Cazamian – unlike Bergson – assumes that humour has an artistic status and attributes characteristics to it that Bergson attributes to works of art. I then turn to Cazamian's conception of the general mechanism of humour, which consists in the transposition of natural emotional and rational reactions to reality into exaggerated reactions that show reality in an unnatural light. I then focus on his highlighting the complexity of the individual applications of the mechanism through which natural reactions are not only suppressed by unnatural ones, but also suggested by them and through which unnatural reactions suggested by natural ones are not only covered up but also emphasized. In particular, however, I point to the shift in Cazamian's stance from his original refusal to define humour, both in the sense of a rejection of a philosophy of humour – which would posit what is common to all instances of humour – and his rejection of the ostensibly general comic character of humour towards his determination of the characteristics of a philosophy of humour and his acknowledgement of the comic features of humour. I emphasize that Cazamian comes to the conclusion that the philosophy of humour is a form of relativism that emphasizes the ambiguity and changeability of reality. Finally, in connection with our interpretation of aspects of Cazamian's theory of humour, I turn to the elaboration of the features of humour that are implicit in Cazamian's writings. I draw attention to the critical function we must attribute to humour in Cazamian's understanding based on his embracing of Bergson's conception of laughter as a critique of the automation of life; I also note that in the context of Cazamian's writings on the necessarily complex significance of humour and on relativism as a philosophy of humour, this critical function appears as ridicule of the inability to countenance the changeable and ambiguous character of things. Nonetheless, in contrast with Bergson's conception of the relationship between the comic and art, this critical aspect of humour appears in the

2 It is noteworthy that Cazamian's theory of humour has not yet been systematically examined before now. I draw attention below to texts in which certain aspects of this theory are interpreted or evaluated.

context of Cazamian's reflections on humour to accord quite well with the artistic status of humour. While the artistic status of humour stems from the fact that humour emphasizes the multifaceted and contradictory character of reality, its comic status arises from ridiculing the inability or unwillingness to respect that reality has this character.

2. Bergsonian Sources of Inspiration

At a general level, Bergson's conception of the comic is the admitted starting point for Louis Cazamian's reflections on humour. In his study "Why We Cannot Define Humour" (1906), Cazamian maintains that Bergson's conception of the comic in *Laughter* (1900)³ can be summed up in the formula "the comic is always created by replacing living freedom with automatism."⁴ Bergson considers this undesirable substitution to be the cause of laughter, which draws attention to, criticizes, remonstrates with, and suppresses the substitution.⁵ One of the areas of

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- 3 Bergson's concept of the comic has been discussed many times, not only in classic analyses but also in the recent literature. Contemporary scholars have repeatedly associated Bergson's concept with the principle of "incongruity". Arthur Asa Berger, *Blind Men and Elephants: Perspectives on Humor* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995): 44; Malcolm Andrews, *Dickensian Laughter: Essays on Dickens and Humour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 78, 93; Gulia Parovel, and Stefano Guidi, "The Psychophysics of Comic: Effects of Incongruity in Causality and Animacy," *Acta Psychologica* 159 (2015): 22–23; Lydia Amir, *Philosophy, Humor, and the Human Condition. Taking Ridicule Seriously* (Palgrave, Cham, 2019): 74–75; Adam Lovasz, "Enlivening Society: Life as Elasticity in Henri Bergson's *Le rire*," *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 16, no. 2 (2020): 203–204. Considering this discussion on Bergson's concept of the comic and the continuity between Cazamian's theory of humour and Bergson's, we can easily conclude that Cazamian's explanation of the comic revolves around incongruity.
 - 4 Louis Cazamian, "Pourquoi nous ne pouvons définir l'humour," *Revue germanique*, no. 2 (1906): 601.
 - 5 The connection between Cazamian's theory and Bergson's conception of the comic had already been observed by Fernand Baldensperger. Fernand Baldensperger, *Études d'histoire littéraire* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1907), 176–222. Emile Pons refers to the concrete starting point of Cazamian's reflections – namely, Bergson's brief remarks on humour. Pons also attempts to identify certain fundamental disparities between Bergson's conception of the comic and Cazamian's conception of humour. He points out that while Bergson defined the comic through the contrast between "living freedom and automatism," Cazamian emphasized the