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Calvin and the Incredible Cranium Enhancing Machine: A Bergsonian Analysis of a
Mad Boy Genius

Calvin: I need some help with my homework, Hobbes.
Hobbes: What's the assignment?

With these rather innocent words, the infamous duo of Calvin and Hobbes descend on an outrageous journey into the night to churn out a Nobel Prize worthy debate paper. Of course, such a noble intention goes awry like most of Calvin's projects, and the end result is a piece of crap of such stunning, breath-taking awfulness that it sets a new low in Calvin's Hall of Fame of Note-worthy Drivel. As if the premise of Calvin's epic undertaking wasn't funny enough, cartoonist Bill Watterson litters Calvin's odyssey towards an "A" paper with a bizarre assortment of metal colanders, T-rex dinosaurs, and turban disguises that not only provide some pee-in-your-undergarments laughter but amazingly enough, fulfill some of the comic definitions from Henri Bergson's essay "Laughter". Indeed, in the "Cerebral Augmentation" episode of the Calvin and Hobbes comic *There's Treasure Everywhere*, Watterson perfectly employs Bergson's comic theory of a character's "absentmindedness" to take his readers on a revisit of their past and to muse at their once limitless wonderment and joy without fear of the bitter remembrances that did often cloud that fragile happiness.

In his article "Laughter" from the text *Comedy*, French philosopher Henri Bergson mentions several comedic elements that invoke humor in a text, and of these characteristics, absentmindedness is especially apparent in Calvin and Hobbes. In one

part of the section on absentmindedness, Bergson asserts “that a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself” (Bergson 71). To begin with, Hobbes, Calvin’s side-kick tiger, is a figment of Calvin’s imagination that Calvin sincerely believes to be real. In an added twist to the ignorance of Calvin, not only does Hobbes interact with Calvin in the comic as if he were a real talking tiger, he makes snide, subtle comments to a Calvin who is completely unaware that he’s the targeted dunce of his imaginary friend. One wonderful example of the way Hobbes is used as a sort of tool to emphasize Calvin’s ignorance is when Calvin declares that he needs a grounding string to go along with his metal cap in order to keep his ideas grounded in reality, and Hobbes replies that he thinks it’s too late (Watterson 51). Hobbes continues sporadically throughout the strip to spew clever jibes at an oblivious Calvin, and he serves as one of many components that expose the disconnection Calvin has with the world around him.

Even without Hobbes, however, Calvin is so wrapped up in his semi-real world that his absentmindedness of the reality at hand is quite obvious. Calvin, as Bergson describes, “becomes invisible to himself, while remaining visible to all the world” (Bergson 71). In order to portray Calvin as having one foot in reality while the other foot in a creative, imaginary land, Watterson draws Calvin in the way he perceives himself, and the result is quite hilarious. One such distorted reality example appears after a stirring Aristotelian deliberative speech by Calvin on the necessity of a thinking cap. Following Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* definition that a deliberative oratory gives evidence for a future policy (Henrick 83), Calvin lays all the reasons for the thinking cap and its various parts, and he then uses this cerebral enhance-o-tron and pulls off the metal colander to reveal a cranium that would even make Albert Einstein jealous. Of course Calvin’s brain

has not really expanded, but Watterson builds on the absurdity of situation at hand by having Calvin believe that he must now hide his enlarged head from his parents by disguising himself in an inconspicuous, Osama-bin-Ladinish turban get-up that naturally has the reverse effect that Calvin had hoped for. Calvin's dad immediately says to him, "Calvin, we don't eat at the table looking like that. Take off the sheet" (Watterson 53), and the punch line is completed when a disgruntled Calvin (still with the enlarged head he imagines) gives his last thought on the matter: "I don't know why I worry. [My parents] never notice anything" (Watterson 53). Calvin's Don Quixotic inability to separate fiction from reality lends itself to laughter because Calvin is unconscious of the humor he invokes in his sincere beliefs of the authenticities of his conjurations.

Calvin's meanderings through his semi-fictitious world is quite amusing, but Bergson states as funny a character's absent-mindedness is, it gains even greater momentum when that absentmindedness is grounded in themes that the audience is familiar with. To be more precise, Bergson states that something becomes more comedic "when a certain comic effect has its origin in certain cause, the more natural we regard the cause to be, the more comic shall we find the effect" (Bergson 68). This means that when the audience sees or hears something they can recognize and understand, they'll laugh harder. According to Aristotle, the audience and the speaker can come to understanding through the speaker's use of arguments that are commonly understood at the time, otherwise referred to in Greek as enthymemes (Henrick 81). In the "Cerebral Augmentation" episode of Calvin and Hobbes, there are several enthymemes recognizable by many Americans who lived a suburban childhood. Once such case is when Calvin displays the vice of procrastination throughout his escapade in coming up with an excellent paper. From the college student who waits until the last minute to write

his PWR paper to the God who waits until the End of Ages to judge mankind, procrastination is a wonderful vice that prevails in just about everyone. As Calvin continues to put off writing his paper until the bitter end, the reader knows from his own past experience that Calvin is in major trouble, and he can't help but chuckle at the foreboding disaster. When the intuition of such a pitiful end is fulfilled during his ceremonial oration of the T-Rex, the reader takes a certain guilty pleasure in knowing that Calvin's simplistic logos on a T-Rex's complex eating habits will result in a poor grade. When Calvin states the title of his paper, it seems to be the beginning of a ceremonial speech that would do justice to the majestic terrible lizards of the past, but instead, he gives evidence that is not only short but ridiculous: "I say tyrannosaurs were predators, because it would be so bogus if they just ate things that were already dead. The end" (Watterson 58). Bergson describes this guilty pleasure as the delight that the audience enjoys from watching the protagonist at the mercy of the vice that he has succumbed to (Bergson 71). After all, there is something very human in hoping that someone else's life is as miserable as yours. In a cynical perspective, the shared experience of a bad day, or even a bad life, is perhaps the ultimate enthymeme.

Vice, however, is not intended to be the main element of recognition for the audience in the comic strip. The shared experience of vice, no matter how funny it can be, is at its heart a laughter that arises from cynicism, and *Calvin and Hobbes* is not founded on this kind of laughter. Instead, it's a humor based on the absentmindedness of fond nostalgia of the childhood past, and herein lies the strength of its natural comic effect, and on a higher scale, its purpose of laughter. All throughout this particular comic strip, there are numerous examples that provide emotional appeal, pathos to the audience (Henrick 87), for almost every grown up man and women wishes at some point to regain

his or her childhood. These examples make us laugh not only at the ridiculous theatrics of Calvin but also at the ridiculous theatrics we, ourselves, once displayed. Sure, it may have not been the imaginary friend named “Hobbes the Tiger”, but it was the imaginary friend named “Terminator the Killer Deathbot” who lynched the bullies that picked on you. It may have not been putting on a metal colander thinking it would increase your brain size, but it was eating Elmer’s glue thinking that it would give you the elixir of life. By incorporating recognizable, sacred themes of childhood with laughter, Watterson allows his readers to reflect back without the sadness of the longing for the unattainable past. The laughter then, act as channels that reach the gay memories that are stored in the deep crevices of the mind while artfully dodging the painful memories that haunt us. The importance of the memories that are created from such laughter is to be judged by each individual, but at the very least, the opportunity to find some kind of meaning or strength from the reconstruction of the joyous past is a gift in itself.

The “Cerebral Augmentation” strip does a wonderful job of implementing the various points of Bergson’s theory of absentmindedness, and it uses them to form one delightful cartoon that makes the reader laugh not only because of the creative mishaps of a mad boy genius but also because of the poignant memories his last minute school project brings to the reader. In retrospective, it is doubtful that Watterson was even aware that Bergson had written an article on laughter, and one only marvels at the seemingly effortless in which Bergson’s complex ideas were seamed into a children’s cartoon. Perhaps this speaks of the genius of cartoonist Bill Watterson*. Or, on the other hand, perhaps it is a testament to Bergson and his knowledge of what goes into fine comedy. Whatever it is, Watterson’s capture of Calvin’s absentmindedness is a

* Undoubtedly, Bill Watterson is a brilliant mind deserving a place in the American literary pantheon alongside the likes of Faulkner, Hemingway, Melville, Poe, and Jackie Collins. The injustice of the sleight of his underrated work year after year will be tackled in a subsequent essay.

success in that it immerses his audience in light-hearted, youthful days that had once seemed to flown away forever.