FANTASY AND IRONY
IN PETER BRUEGEL’S PRINTS

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Peter Bruegel is now famous as the creator of modern landscape painting, but during his lifetime he owed much of his reputation to the satire found in many of his paintings and most of his prints. From an account of the Low Countries by Guicciardini (Antwerp, 1567) we know that in his own day Bruegel was considered a “great imitator of the knowledge and fantasies of Jerome Bosch.” Today his satires do not share the popularity of his landscapes, because they were addressed to his contemporaries and therefore rooted in the idiom of sixteenth-century Flanders. In our haste we shy away from this unfamiliar language, and thus we miss a treat, one that is comparable to the treats awaiting foreigners in Alice in Wonderland and Gulliver’s Travels.

Fantasy is but one element in the wide range of Bruegel’s satirical expression, and it varies in form with the tone of his comments. In the prints of the Seven Vices he poked fun at human weaknesses and folly by translating into visual images ordinary, everyday expressions that would strike home immediately to his Flemish audience. At first glance these prints seem to us completely unreal and out of joint; even his contemporary Vasari found them full of “various kinds of devils, a fantastic and comic affair.” On looking more closely we can see that nothing could be more clearly or logically put together. Fantasy plays a definite role, but it is controlled and purposeful.

The basis of fantasy in Bruegel’s Vices is the presentation of an assortment of familiar things in an unexpected way. We can perhaps best grasp his method if we try to translate Bruegel’s print of Sloth into modern American terms. It would, of course, take another Lewis Carroll to work out an adequate “libretto” for a present-day counterpart, but a few images may serve to set the scheme. They might include “lounge lizard,” “lazybones,” “snail’s pace,” “sluggish.” If these common sayings are represented by a real lizard on a lounge, a skeleton relaxed in a beach chair, and actual snails and slugs, the result is a strange visual mixture. Yet this was Bruegel’s method, and it accounts for the style of his prints; for only a fantastic style could harmonize such visual incongruities. The style popularized by Bosch half a century earlier provided Bruegel with an instrument which he adapted to his purpose. But the parallel ends with style, for in Bruegel’s prints we find none of Bosch’s fierce religious moralizing.

The print of Sloth shows very well the precise quality of Bruegel’s fantasy. Some of the figures illustrate typically Flemish proverbs; others represent expressions familiar to us, such as “snail’s pace.” Snails pervade the scene in various forms; even the monster in the left foreground seems to be related to the snail species, and the giant in the background has above him the equally giant figure of a slug. The figure labeled Sloth, sleeping on a pillow held by a devil, illustrates the proverb “Sloth is the pillow of the devil.” That “No pillow leads to heaven” is shown by a devil in monkish garb pulling along a man in a bed on wheels. Near by an owl perches above a couple still abed—“a regular nest of owls.” Bruegel uses one of his favorite devices, a pictorial pun, in the striking clock above the bed; it illustrates the Flemish phrase De klok lui, lui meaning both strike and lazy. The basic fantasy is heightened by combining devils and monsters with the proverbs and by arbitrary use of scale; and an appropriately eerie setting is created by the diagonal arrangement and the interweaving lines of the composition.

Throughout the set of the Vices Bruegel’s treatment is in the form of variations on a
Sloth, an engraving after Peter Bruegel. One of “The Seven Vices”

theme, quite similar to musical variations. Each print is built around a symbolical figure accompanied by her symbolical animal, and the theme set by them is carried through the picture by the proverbs and the imaginary creatures; it even carries into the landscape, whose forms seem to partake of the quality of the vice. In each print we see a similar mixture; yet each has a fresh spicing. In the print of Envy, for instance, Bruegel injects into the midst of his well-worn proverbs a brand-new note by using a turkey. The earliest known representations of this American bird, in Belon’s Oyseaux, 1555, antedate Bruegel’s drawing for this print by only two years; and he uses the turkey right off as the symbol of envy.

Bruegel’s prints of the Vices have often been compared with modern surrealism, but even this brief analysis shows the similarity to be quite superficial. In fact, in the catalogue of the Exhibition of Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1936 Alfred Barr urged that we should beware of hastily associating the work of such artists as Bosch and Bruegel with the “subconscious and irrational expression” of surrealism. Bruegel’s prints are not only highly conscious and rational; they are the witty expressions of a very healthy mind.

As a pendant to the Seven Vices, Bruegel began in 1559 a series of the Seven Virtues, which is in a more purely satirical vein. Though he was not the first satirical artist, Bruegel was the first to strike the note of irony that characterizes so much of modern satire. The same steady eye that caught new beauties of nature penetrated the subtlest of human hypocrisies. With him the Virtues became a study in hypocrisy, and his method of presentation is fittingly two-faced. We are all fa-
miliar with the trick of making a remark mean exactly the opposite of its wording by changing the inflection; Bruegel did this in visual terms. His approach corresponds with that of Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly*: “All human things, like the Silenus of Alcibiades, have two sides which are dissimilar. . . . What at first sight is beautiful may really be ugly; the learned, ignorant; the noble, base. . . . Lift off the mask of Silenus, and you have the opposite of what you have seen.” Bruegel makes his satirical commentary on the Virtues by omitting or altering certain key attributes of the central allegorical figures and filling the rest of the composition with scenes from actual life which show that virtue is its own reward.

The print of Justice is immediately interesting to us as a picture of court proceedings and punishments of the sixteenth century. Seen from the point of view of a contemporary who was familiar with the set of attributes which Bruegel uses, the print is full of satire. Although Justice holds the customary sword and scales, her bed and pillow are missing. The bed was symbolical of the repose the judge needs to prepare his sentence; the pillow, of pity, which tempers justice. These omissions give the key to Bruegel’s meaning, for here, in the midst of noise and bustle, the judge sentences innocent as well as guilty to the most cruel punishments, which are carried out before the greedy eyes of many onlookers. While the omissions provide helpful clues to the understanding of this print, its message is clearly stated in the scenes themselves. The casual air of the executioners, the gaping of the spectators, for example, reveal Bruegel’s point directly, as does the carved group representing Christ’s crucifixion which, from the upper left, overlooks the carnage below.
Temperance, an engraving after Bruegel. One of “The Seven Virtues”

The tone of the Justice print was appropriately angry, but that of the print of Temperance is the more usual taunting banter that links Bruegel so closely to Erasmus. At first sight this picture seems to be a proud display of the fruits of human industry as shown in the seven liberal arts; for, proceeding clockwise from the lower left-hand corner, one sees Arithmetic, Music, Rhetoric, Astronomy, Geometry, Logic, Grammar. But the truth is the reverse of the first impression, as Bruegel hints by having Temperance trample underfoot the sail of the windmill, which symbolizes orderly, regular work. In each of the arts intemperance and confusion reign. The actors who represent Rhetoric include fools and play in a booth decked with the banner of the world upside down. The philosophers all talk at once. The organ, the choir, the trombones, the lutes, all sound at the same time. In his drawing for this print Bruegel had made the discord of his musical group even harsher by including a bagpipe, but this was apparently offensive to the sensibilities of the engraver, who left it out. In looking at the print one can all but hear the voice of Erasmus’s Folly: “The logicians and sophists [are] more loquacious than the famous brass kettles of Dodona; any one of them can out-talk twenty picked women. They would be happier if they were . . . not quarrelsome too. . . . [As for] the scientists . . . how pleasantly they dote as they construct their numberless worlds and measure the sun, moon, stars and spheres as with thumb and line. . . . They assign causes for inexplicable things as if they were privy to the secrets of nature or as if they came to us from the council of the gods. . . . Some of them can even foretell events from a study of the stars.”

Late in his life, in the print of Saint James
and the Magician, Bruegel departed from the straightforward realism seen in the Virtues to take up Bosch's style again. Having a particularly dangerous message, he chose this as his language, so that his point would be as clear to his fellow Flemings as it would be difficult for their Spanish rulers to recognize and to demonstrate as heresy. Taking his story from the *Golden Legend*, and covering it with a protective smoke screen of diabolical fancy, he once again turned the tale around to show his meaning. The *Golden Legend* relates that after Saint James had bested Hermogenes in a duel of power, having him bound by his own devils, the demons asked the saint to let them have vengeance on Hermogenes, but he released the magician, saying: “Let us follow the example of Christ, Who taught that we should return good for evil. Go freely, Hermogenes, where you will; our law does not allow that one be converted against his will.” In Bruegel’s print Saint James lets the demons tear Hermogenes to pieces. This flat reversal of the legend turns the story into an attack on the Inquisition, which was one of the principal horrors of Spanish rule in the Netherlands. Having pricked the Spanish through their own patron saint, Bruegel then added ridicule by filling the rest of the picture with circus charlatans and tumblers. Subtle as it is, a courageous political cartoon like this explains why on his death bed he had his wife destroy all the drawings in the house.

The best interpretation of the content of Bruegel’s works is that of Charles de Tolnay (Die Zeichnungen Pieter Bruegels and Pierre Bruegel l’ancien). Though not in agreement with all of Tolnay’s conclusions, the writer is deeply indebted to his pioneer researches.