



Pariah to Paragon: James Ensor and the Carnavalesque

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Belgian artist James Ensor (1860-1949) and the regard for his *oeuvre* have led a volatile existence within the art world and the discourse of art history. His teachers at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels disliked his method. The art-going public of the late nineteenth century despised his bizarre subject matter and his unconventional painting style. Critics of the time called his paintings “ignoble sights,” “sinister idiocies,” “studio rubbish,” and “garbage.” ¹ During the 1880’s, what is now considered his best and most productive period, he experienced the most difficulty selling his work.

Ensor’s *oeuvre* troubled viewers because it was populated with grotesque imagery and charged with an intense personal vision—characteristics that aligned the artist with the Expressionism movement of the early years of the twentieth century. However, we must also consider Ensor within the context of his specific cultural background—one that adds meaning and further significance to his work, namely, the Flemish tradition associated with renowned Renaissance painters Hieronymus Bosch (c.1450-1516) and Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1529-1569). Recognizing the relationship of Ensor to his precursors is crucial to an understanding of his works. As such, the goal of this essay is to link Ensor to Bosch and Bruegel, specifically through the concept of the *carnavalesque* as articulated by Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) in his book *Rabelais and His World*. ²

First let us explore Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque. For Bakhtin, the medieval celebration of Carnival went beyond its Christian function to assume a secular-social one. It was a liberating time in the restrained culture of feudal Northern Europe when hierarchic differences in rank and status were suspended. The Carnival season took place two weeks before the solemn fast of Lent, but, although subversive, it never fully overthrew official power structures. Carnival existed within the dominant sphere, and was always a temporary event. In many ways, it served to reinforce the control of the elite, who allowed the masses the release of Carnival revelry.

The carnivalesque, to Bakhtin, is the manifestation of Carnival spirit in cultural production like paintings and literary works. Bakhtin’s main source for the development of his idea is French author Rabelais’ book *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, begun in 1532, which contains grotesque imagery and social satire. ³ Bakhtin’s theories can be applied to Renaissance painters of Northern Europe like Bosch and Bruegel and by extension, the modern Belgian artist James Ensor and other visual artists.

According to Bakhtin, the carnivalesque is a primary outgrowth of “folk,” or popular culture that the common people take part in and help to form. ⁴ Just because it is “common” does not mean folk culture and the carnivalesque lack complexity. The carnivalesque subverts official doctrine, according to Bakhtin, through means such as ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions, billingsgate (coarse language), grotesque imagery, and, in his words, imagery of the “material bodily lower stratum,” by which he means the scatological. ⁵

The carnivalesque operates in the work of James Ensor through imagery, content, and stylistic rebellion that are deployed in a fashion that maintains an alliance with the works of the earlier Northern painters. Ensor would no doubt have been aware of important pieces such as Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c.1504, Museo del Prado, Madrid) and Bruegel’s *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559, Staatliche Museum, Berlin). (Figs. 1,2) As these paintings and the cultural issues that generated them (and others in the same vein) served as background for Ensor, we will now look at how they resonate in Ensor’s work.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

First, visual puns and playful manifestations of language typical of carnivalesque revelry are present both in Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs*. This tendency for play on words also exists in Ensor's work. His 1891 painting *Skeletons Fighting Over a Pickled Herring* (1891, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels) is an excellent example. It depicts two clothed skeletons fighting over a pickled herring, a traditional food in the Low Countries often associated with Carnival. The skeletons each hold one end of the fish between their teeth and threaten to rip it apart. This is significant as the word for pickled herring in French—*hareng-saur*—is assonant with the phrase “Art Ensor.”⁶ Starting from a visual pun, Ensor has created a considerable literary metaphor in which he is the herring and the skeletons are two critics who destroy the artist.

The conduit through which Ensor's work most strongly forms an alliance with Bakhtin's ideation of the bodily carnivalesque is the realm of the scatological—or crude references to excretory and other bodily functions. For Bakhtin, this “downward movement” associated with the scatological relates to the dethroning of authority and resurgence of earthiness during Carnival. This sort of imagery appears often in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*—the prime example given by Bakhtin is when a young Gargantua speaks lengthily and graphically on the subject of swabs and what material makes up the best ones.⁷ The scatological had a presence in Flemish art and culture before and during Ensor's time. In Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs*, there are several such references, most prominently, a pair of rear ends sticking out of a wooden lavatory structure and over a pond.

Susan M. Canning identifies the title page of a nineteenth-century Belgian book by Theodore Hannon called *Au pays de Manneken-Pis (In the land of Manneken-Pis)* (1883, Bibliothèque Royale, Brussels) as a prototype for one of James Ensor's earliest scatological works.⁸ It shows the back of a working class man urinating against a wall. Ensor's work is a small etching, made in 1887 and known as *The Pisser* (Bibliothèque Royale, Brussels). It also depicts a man urinating against a wall. However, in Ensor's print, the man wears striped pants and a top hat, identifying him as a member of the bourgeoisie. The large upturned moustache that can be made out despite the rear view allows the

figure to be identified as Ensor, who depicted himself with one in numerous self-portraits of this time. ⁹ Another source is a drawing, also known as *The Pisser* (n.d., Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence), by the French Baroque printmaker Jacques Callot, known for political imagery. Ensor's etching retains a certain linear quality that has come to be associated with Callot. In Callot's drawing, the man urinating is a jester. Canning finds Ensor's reinterpretation politically significant. "By exchanging the jester's costume or the worker's clothes for the trappings of the bourgeoisie, Ensor implies that, in its naturalness, elimination acts as a social leveler." ¹⁰

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin identifies grotesque imagery as one of the hallmarks of the carnivalesque. While the term "carnavalesque" did not always have negative connotations, according to Bakhtin, "modern indecent abuse has retained dead and purely negative remnants of the grotesque concept of the body." ¹¹ The grotesque is manifest in Ensor's etching *Doctrinaire Nourishment* (1889, Bibliothèque Royale, Brussels). This etching shows the King and representatives of the Clergy and the Liberal Party defecating on the masses below them, some of whom hold their mouths open expectantly. The defecation of the Belgian authority figures is a purely negative and damaging emptying of the bowels. The print displays Ensor's typical cynical attitude towards those who hold the power in Belgium. Their actions lack any of the connotations of a regenerative, natural process that Bakhtin typically associates with the carnivalesque. In his own words, "...almost nothing has remained of the ambivalent meaning they [the objects of abuse] would also be revived; only the bare cynicism and insult have survived." ¹²

Ensor includes similar political commentary relating to the scatological grotesque in his work *The Strike* (1888, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp), a colored pencil drawing from 1888, depicts Ensor's fantasy version of a real event—an August 1887 strike organized by the fishermen of Ostend protesting British use of their waters. During the strike, several fishermen were killed by the police. ¹³ The drawing shows uniformed police officers running amok on the docks. A large Belgian flag waves in the upper right corner. From balconies below the flag, fishermen and townspeople defecate on a row of policemen organized and lined up like toy soldiers. Some of the people on the balconies vomit fish upon them as well. Since fishing has been the traditional industry of Ostend, the fishermen are particularly representative of the city. In the drawing, they become subversive agents of freedom invoking the "liberating qualities of waste matter" to battle the policeman, pawns of state authority and oppression. ¹⁴

To better understand Ensor's explicitly political work, which often combines anarchic sympathies with the scatological, we must now look at some background on the political situation of 1880's and 90's Belgium, or Ensor's own time. Léopold II became the second King of the Belgians in 1865 upon the death of his father. At home, he faced the challenge of maintaining his royal authority in a society undergoing rapid political and economical modernization. Abroad, he attempted to garner prestige for Belgium with the possession of colonial assets in Africa.

Pageantry was one of King Léopold II's methods of planting ideology—designed to reinforce his power—within Belgian society. Ensor, a painter particularly adept and comfortable with ceremony as subject matter, would use this to his advantage. Patricia Berman describes one example of the King's ideological seeding:

In the year of his inauguration as king, Léopold II traveled throughout Belgium reenacting the old 'Joyous Entries,' the ceremonies guaranteeing liberties to the provinces as affirmed under the charter known as the 'Joyous Entry,' practiced by the dukes of Brabant. ¹⁵

An 1877 caricature (1877, Harvard Libraries, Cambridge) of Léopold II shows him hieratically enlarged, leaning over a wall, and distributing medals at one of these royal festivals to an eager crowd with arms outstretched and trampling each other. ¹⁶

In Ensor's *Doctrinaire Nourishment*, a similarly large Léopold II, identified by his "divine" crown and orb, is accompanied by representatives of the military, the Catholic party, and the Liberal party in a scene of distribution. However, they squat on a balcony with trousers removed and, instead of medals, distribute their feces over the crowd. Three of the five figures hold signs that read "service personnel," "suffrage universel," and "instruction obligatoire" (personal service, universal voting rights, and mandatory education.)

Pageantry and ceremony are central to Carnival. This fact may appear incongruous, since the carnivalesque seeks to subvert power structures and the public displays used to reinforce them. Yet when deployed as mimicry, pageantry never completely overthrows existing power structures, which are understood to soon resume. This understanding is, in part, why the practice was tolerated by officialdom. Léopold II was shrewd in using Belgium's cultural pageantry heritage to implant his ideology (as mentioned). Bakhtin describes this sort of action, although not this particular case, by stating "the state encroached upon festive life and turned it into a parade." ¹⁷ By doing this, the King made the ground fertile and provided an idea for subject matter for Ensor's most acclaimed work, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (1888; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles). (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3 | © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SABAM, Brussels

The painting depicts an imagined scene in which Jesus returns to Earth and is triumphantly paraded through the streets of the capital city. Although recognizable, Jesus's haloed form riding atop a donkey becomes lost in the roughly eight-by-fourteen-foot canvas. A swarming crowd in a Carnival procession cascades towards the viewer from a vanishing point in the upper right portion of the painting. In the foreground, the figures closest to the viewer come into focus. The aesthetic condition is created whereby one feels about to be crushed by the unstoppable forward march of the gathered mass. Many of them don garish Carnival masks with enlarged noses or are made to look like skeletons.

Written slogans and pronouncements populate *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*. A sign that says "Vive Jesus—Roi de Bruxelles" hangs off stage where officials survey the crowd and a clown bends over to direct his rear-end at the viewer. "Vive la Sociale" (Long Live the Socialist State) is blazoned across a large red banner. A sign reading "Fanfares Doctrinaires Toujours Reussis" (Doctrinaire Fanfare Always Wins) exists as a compositional keystone between the foreground and background. This is the most explicitly sarcastic sign of the group and comments on the power of a co-opted carnivalesque parade to reinforce the status-quo supported by the doctrinaires. In the upper left, figures defecate and vomit on Les XX's emblem, invoking the scatological and assuring the painting's rejection from Les XX's salon. As Patricia Berman writes, the Carnival setting of the painting gives Ensor the opportunity "to lampoon all aspects of his social landscape. With its suspension of normal power relations and its anarchic masquerade, Carnival gave Ensor the license to articulate what he saw as hidden truths."¹⁸

In Ensor's 1889 etching, *Belgium in the 19th Century* (c.1889, Bibliothèque Royale Albert Ier, Brussels), the Carnival crowd has dissolved. Instead, the masses here engage in protest. Again, a hoisted flag lists the dominant political issues: personal service, and universal voting rights, free education. The protestors are in chaos as a seemingly endless phalanx of soldiers press down on them. Above the scene, divine rays of light spreading behind him, King Léopold II holds spectacles to his eyes and scrutinizes the crowd. Three registers below him display what he says. "What do you want? Aren't you content? I can see something, but I don't know what caused it. I can't make it out very well." The King remains willfully ignorant of his subjects' interests. This model of monarchy, with an all-important and self-interested King, was ripe for Ensor's mockery.

The specific tradition of Northern art that invoked carnivalesque imagery did so in the name of moral satire. Bosch's biblical humans, poisoned by original sin, frolic and folly in the central panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, and end up in Hell in the painting's right panel. Bruegel's peasants act out proverbial wisdom and exist to lampoon foolish behavior. One of satire's common traits is an inversion of conventions similar to the carnivalesque "world upside down". Using many similar forms, and sprouting from the same fertile ground of Northern art, Ensor's art transformed from moral satire into political satire. As a subversive detractor to his nation's official establishment, he invoked some of its most culturally significant art and its anarchic carnivalesque traditions to formulate a robust indictment of many segments of Belgian society, including the royalty and the bourgeoisie. His satires have the full weight of regional tradition behind them, making them all the more penetrating.

However, though his railings against authority were potent, they contain an alternate, unintentional significance. Just as the chaotic celebrations of Carnival were sanctioned by Christianity's officialdom, James Ensor, despite his sharply critical work of the 1880's and 90's, was eventually accepted by the Belgian government. He was made Chevalier in the Belgian Order of Léopold in 1903, and in 1927, King Albert I granted him the title of Baron. The same acceptance happened to Bosch and Bruegel, whose teeming, disorganized masses also never communicated the sort of order and poise that a political establishment typically wishes to ideologically communicate

through sanctioned art. Ensor's assimilation came after his most productive period had ended and helped to ensure that any return to a subversive critique of Belgian society would carry less clout. Ensor's drawing *The Baths at Ostend* (1890, private collection), a crowded burlesque packed with explicit sexual and scatological imagery, was wryly approved of by King Léopold II who said, "Monsieur Ensor has done the subject very well; he has not exaggerated, this is exactly how one bathes in Ostend." ¹⁹

Political tradition in the Low Countries have illustrated that what might be called an "officially unofficial" alternative culture, which fractures the status quo, and serves the practical purpose for the powers that be of providing an outlet for the frustrations and difficulty a government can bring to its people. In nineteenth-century Belgium, Léopold II invoked the carnivalesque parade, with modifications, in an attempt to advance state ideology. Ensor took up the forms, imagery, and sentiment of the carnivalesque and synthesized them with his personal background and individualized artistic style to vent his political discontent. His art was marginalized early in his career, when it was the most vehemently political. By the early twentieth century, particularly after World War I, Ensor's politics had cooled, at least partly due to frustration with his lack of success, and the government's attitude towards him had begun to warm. As Belgian society became incrementally more progressive, Ensor became more useful as an exemplar of Belgian artistic tradition than as an outcast.

This late period of the artist's career is characterized by a significant decline of political subject matter in his work. Although Ensor did revisit some of his previous political pieces, he executed them in a watered-down style and focused mainly on earlier issues; thus, I believe they were created with a primarily commercial motive—as recognizable "Ensors." These works would be marketable to an art-buying public that had finally begun to purchase his efforts.

Within the discourse on Ensor, much attention and interpretation is funneled through a formalist perspective that legitimizes Ensor as a proto-Expressionist. Biographical and psychoanalytical studies that investigate Ensor the person focus on his solitude and rejections. This approach supports the proto-Expressionist stance, making Ensor not only an Expressionist in style, but also in angst-ridden psychology. While these points are valid and interesting, I feel that the political content, which scorns authority and invokes specific cultural imagery—via the carnivalesque—speak just as loud as the formal idiosyncrasies in Ensor's art. The trajectory of Ensor's career from pariah to paragon mirrors the nature of Carnival, which is simultaneously subversive and validating. While his work is relevant for its often radical anarchist tendencies, his acceptance into the mainstream effectively illustrates how authority can mitigate dissent in art culture. Any comprehensive study of Ensor must include cultural and political investigations that encompass the carnivalesque.

1. Jacques Janssens, *James Ensor*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1978), 72.

2. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, reprinted 1984).

3. For a recent translation of this book see François Rabelais, trans. M.A. Screech, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (London: Penguin Books, 2006.)

4. Janssens, 4.

5. Bakhtin, 21.

6. Ulrike Becks Malorney, *James Ensor: Masks, Death, and the Sea*, (Köln: Taschen, 1999), 77.

7. Bakhtin, 371-377.

8. Manneken Pis is a public fountain sculpture in Brussels that depicts a young boy urinating. There are multiple stories that explaining the legend of the statue, but all of them have to do with the boy's urination helping the city of Brussels. The most widely told legend states that in the fourteenth century Brussels was under attack, and the enemy army was going to blow open the city walls with explosives. The boy represented in the sculpture happened to see the charges being set, and urinated on the fuses, putting them out and saving the city. Because the boy represented as Manneken Pis legendarily saved Brussels from an invader, he is a symbol of Belgium's resistance to outside forces. Ensor most likely identified with this aspect of Manneken Pis. Susan M. Canning, "The Ordure of Anarchy: Scatological Signs of Self and Society in the Art of James Ensor," *Art Journal* 52, no. 3, (Fall 1993), 47.

9. Canning, 47.

10. Canning, 48.
11. Bakhtin, 28.
12. Bakhtin, 28.
13. Canning, 52.
14. Canning, 52.
15. Patricia Berman, *James Ensor: Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*, (Los Angeles: Getty, 2002), 58.
16. Berman, 56.
17. Bakhtin, 33.
18. Bakhtin, 67-69. See Mark Leonard and Louise Lippincott, "James Ensor's *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*," *Art Journal* 54, no. 2, (Summer 1995), 18-27. Another unlikely but important connection between Ensor and his Flemish predecessors may be made through a recent analysis of the technique employed in this work. During a cleaning upon its purchase by the Getty Museum, significant underdrawing was discovered. This calculated composition contrasts with Expressionist practice, where paint is applied with an emotional and psychological spontaneity.
- 19 Becks-Malorney, 55