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Peter Henisch's Modern-Day Mary and Joseph Story: *Die schwangere Madonna*

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"In pursuit of another, one encounters oneself."
Die kleine Figur meines Vaters

Peter Henisch has been a visible fixture on the Austrian literary scene since the 1970s. His major breakthrough occurred in 1975 with the publication of the novel, *Die kleine Figur meines Vaters*,¹ which has been followed by a steady stream of widely read novels, texts, and poems up to the present day. Much of the author's work is a self-proclaimed work in progress. Often incorporating intertextual references to history, culture and artistic forms, interspersing music and musical overtones within his texts, and reworking earlier publications—*Die kleine Figur meines Vaters*, for example, was revised and republished in 1987—Henisch invariably writes about imperfect characters on society's fringe as they encounter cultural, gender, and generational obstacles in their search for identity. In *Morrison's Versteck*, his novel about Jim Morrison, the nonconformist lead singer of The Doors,² for example, Henisch confronts established societal norms with his treatment of homo- and heterosexual themes and mediates between an abstract modernism and a popular and populist realism. Henisch's discourse invariably allows for considerable ambiguity, flux, and variety in the multiple voices expressed in his irony-laden writing.

Himself a product of the turbulent 1960s, Henisch treats both historical and fictional characters who arguably often reflect his own personal experience or with whom he at least easily identifies. From his own father Walter Henisch, to Jim Morrison, to Hamlet, to E.T.A. Hoffmann, to Baronkarl, to Black Peter, Henisch views life and society through the eyes of eccentric and exceptional characters caught up in the conflict between traditional societal values and individual freedom,

between the *status quo* and self-expressive unconventionality. His recent novel, *Die schwangere Madonna* (2005), continues this trend, even though it distinguishes itself from his earlier work in several important respects: in addition to being perhaps his most humorous work, the title of the novel identifies a female character while simultaneously omitting the name of the novel's central character, who as in his other works remains a male.³

The title *Die schwangere Madonna* references a 15th century fresco of the Madonna del Parto, the pregnant Madonna, by Italian Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca (1412-1492). The fresco, once housed in the Church of Santa Maria a Nomentana in the town of Monterchi in Tuscany, is presently displayed in its restored form in a museum converted from a former school that is now dedicated to the painting. The geographical location of the town is significant, as it lies along the route of the novel's main characters as they traverse Italy. Josef Urban and his young female companion Maria encounter Monterchi twice on their road trip that began in their home city north of the Alps and takes them initially past the town as they continue their journey down the east coast of Italy to Sicily and then back up the west coast to return to Monterchi where the novel ends. Whereas the original Renaissance painting portrays a pregnant Madonna in period Italian dress standing between two attending angels, Henisch's "unholy" Madonna,⁴ also presumably pregnant and also named Maria, bears close physical resemblance to the fresco's image but is transformed into a modern-day, cell-phone carrying, obstinate, self-willed, instant-messaging schoolgirl (*Gymnasiastin*).

Some explanation of the title of this paper is in order, since the reference to a Mary and Joseph story is both apt and somewhat misleading. As indicated above, the two main characters of Henisch's novel are similarly named and, therefore, their relationship to the "archetypal" biblical story of Mary and Joseph is, at least, intimated. But this established relationship itself hints further at two important elements of Henisch's writing throughout his career that must be explored in greater detail: intertextuality and hybridity. His interest in such relationships is perhaps again evident when one considers the list of characters mentioned above from his other works. In this case, the intertextuality is further supported by the fact that the famous fresco, whose image resembles Henisch's schoolgirl Maria (at least in the mind of his main character Josef Urban, from whose perspective the

novel is narrated), is also housed in a former school. From the fictional to the real, Henisch typically places his characters and their narratives within a framework that draws upon Austrian and Western European cultural identities of both a high C nature (Hamlet, E.T.A. Hoffmann) and a low c (Jim Morrison, Baronkarl, Black Peter). As will be seen, intertextual references and hybridized characters abound in his work and do support the characterization of it as a Mary and Joseph story.

This interplay of high culture and popular culture is evident already in the juxtaposition of the two mottos Henisch selected for this work, both of which reference a Maria/Mary figure. The first is taken from German Romanticism's Novalis in which the poet speaks of the lover's consuming preoccupation with the beloved Maria and of his soul's uniquely heightened ability to distill her transfigured essence out of his countless visual images of her.⁵ The other is taken from rock musician, guitarist, and songwriter Jimi Hendrix, whose lyrics reflect the transitoriness of love and life and the desperate attempt to rediscover that love.⁶ Furthermore, Henisch's novel includes numerous juxtapositions of biblical references and pop culture, which sometimes border on the blasphemous.⁷ Following up on this and other examples from the novel, critics have appropriately described the work as a "divine comedy," a parody of the Christian Christmas story, and as one filled with a sense of the Almighty's heightened humor ("Von Gottes höherem Humor").⁸ Though perhaps not attaining the level of what Schmitz calls an "uninterrupted sequence of tragic events of irresistible comedy" ("ununterbrochene[r] Folge tragischer Ereignisse von unwiderstehlicher Komik"), *Die schwangere Madonna* is most certainly a work filled with highly ironic twists and instances of happenstance that have the same critic speak more fittingly of "heavenly smirking" ("das himmlische Schmunzeln") and another of Henisch's Almighty as "a kind of smiling hippie" ("eine Art lächelnder Hippie").

Yet on another level, the similarities to the *Bible* stories surrounding the Virgin Mary and her husband Joseph barely supersede the fact that the two main characters of Henisch's novel share the same names as their biblical counterparts. Henisch's narrative does make oblique reference to a play and TV film by fellow Austrian Peter Turrini entitled *Josef und Maria*, which is a modern-day Christmas story, but other than the fact that his novel is set similarly during the season of Advent, Henisch's Mary and Joseph Christmas story appears just as closely aligned with gangster and criminal films such as *Bonnie and*

Clyde or even with such popular films as *Lolita* as his characters continue their journey.⁹ Josef himself makes the direct connection to *Bonnie and Clyde*, though he admittedly states that his and Maria's story lacks the violent, murderous rampages of the former popular film. Here the modern reader observes Henisch's proclivity to juxtapose the divine with the profane. The culturally and historically ingrained images of the Virgin and her spouse journeying to Bethlehem contrast almost blasphemously with the plot lines of contemporary movies about the criminal rampages of *Bonnie and Clyde* or the young seductress *Lolita*. While such intertextually fertile ground exists, it is not always clear what Henisch's ultimate goal is, other perhaps than to explore the encounter with oneself, which the motto to this article from Henisch's most important novel, *Die kleine Figur meines Vaters*, indicates. In the end, it is the inherent irony of the human condition in dealing with the sublime and the inane that Henisch exposes.

Moreover, throughout the novel there are to be sure multiple references to the Virgin Mary in Catholic Italy that serve as amplification of and counterpoint to the author's more worldly, contemporary Maria. Most of these references do not directly involve a corresponding Joseph figure but serve to support Henisch's general inclination towards irony by juxtaposing manifestations of the Catholic Virgin with his very profane schoolgirl. But perhaps the final irony behind these associations is the fact that Henisch's Josef is essentially and ultimately excluded from his Madonna's world, just as he is in large part ignored in the intertextual references between the author's hybrid Maria and the Virgin Mary. One might, nevertheless, develop the notion of his relationship with Maria as a "Joseph's marriage" ("Josefsehe"), because similar to the biblical Joseph, who was not the biological father of the Christ Child and whose marriage to Mary was essentially one in which sexual union was merely contemplated but not consummated, Henisch's Josef Urban is essentially excluded from his Maria's world because of their basic incompatibility. Henisch's Josef, too, despite his feeling of responsibility to serve as Maria's protector, is plagued throughout the novel by the strong temptation to view her as a desirable sexual partner. In the interplay of these various intertextual connections lies much of the humor and irony of Henisch's somewhat "over-the-top" novel. Here, too, the encounter with Maria, though unrequited, has led Josef to experience his own being more fully, even if that experience has not led to transfiguration or enlightenment but such is the fate of modern man

and is symptomatic of his never-ending search for answers that elude him, even in his advanced maturity,

Pursuing the Mary and Joseph analogy further, Henisch's Josef just as the biblical Joseph who sought shelter for his pregnant wife in Bethlehem, is, in broad terms, seeking shelter on his journey. He listens to the music of Leonard Cohen and may be compared to the rootless wanderer of the non-conformist songwriter's "The Stranger Song," who is "just some Joseph looking for a manger." In seeking refuge for himself and Maria far removed from his familiar native surroundings, Henisch's Josef becomes emotionally involved with his companion and struggles with the conflicting roles of fatherly protector and potential lover of the young schoolgirl. Conversely, through her actions, words, and her notebook entries that Josef eventually discovers at the end of his narrative, Maria views Josef (and Wolf and Carlo, the two other middle-aged characters enamored with her), as an untrustworthy voyeur into whose male psyche she possesses astute psychological insight.

In developing his intertextual character studies, Henisch crosses not only thematic boundaries but also structural ones involving various genres and media. One example is the blending of biographical and novelistic forms that occurs in the cases of *Die kleine Figur meines Vaters*, *Morrison's Versteck*, and *Schwarzer Peter*. In *Die kleine*, the author also intertwines the written word with photographic and filmic elements as he comes to terms with his father's decorated career as a war photographer for the Nazis and confronts his father's life-long balancing act between detached photojournalism and human compassion and moral responsibility.¹⁰ In both *Morrison's Versteck* and *Schwarzer Peter*, Henisch relies heavily upon the musical references and rock and jazz lyrics, respectively, to support plot and character development. In the novel under discussion here, similar structural development results from the juxtaposition of the high art of Renaissance painting and a modern-day pop culture obsessively dependent on cell phones and instant messaging.

As a motif, Italy itself comprises a strong intertextual presence in the novel. From Winckelmann's eighteenth century research into Greco-Roman art to Goethe's time and thereafter, Italy has assumed a significant place in German cultural and literary history. From letters to journals to poetry to novels, Italy and its culture have supplied material for masterpieces of German literature, such as Goethe's *Italienische Reise* and Thomas Mann's *Tod in Venedig*. Following in this tradition, Henisch,

functioning in part as travel guide, recreates a journey through the physical and cultural Italian landscape. Enhancing this Italian ambience, too, is the fact that he intersperses his text with a sprinkling of the Italian language. Josef and Maria's journey through Italy are ironic modern-day parallels to those of Goethe and Winckelmann.

The road movie, too, for example, Wim Wenders' *Paris Texas* (1984),¹¹ provides an obvious element of structural intertextuality as does Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*. Henisch's work, divided into five parts, is a literary hybridization of the Beat Generation's search on the road for a life worth living, as the action takes Henisch's main characters by car through the Italian landscape. Structurally, much of Henisch's text incorporates cinematic vocabulary and elements as well, something not particularly surprising, since Josef, the novel's first-person narrator, has made his living creating features for the media such as the planned radio broadcast on Alzheimers patients and the prior one on Ernest Hemingway, which he actually researched some years ago in the area just north of Venice, where the expatriate author actually wrote *A Farewell to Arms*. Josef's mind works like that of a filmmaker, the profession to which he most aspired since childhood; he speaks of the camera in his head ("Kamera in meinem Kopf," 71) and describes film as a figure's movement in space and time and the attempt to hold fast to part of that movement ("die Bewegung einer Figur in Raum und Zeit, der Versuch, etwas von dieser Bewegung festzuhalten," 71). As Josef continues narrating his and Maria's stories and those of the other characters intertwined with theirs, he repeatedly employs cinematic terms as the camera of his mind and memory rolls. Flashbacks and flash-forwards, backlighting, slow and fast motion, split screen, etc., characterize his approach to narration. In identifying himself and Maria as the protagonists in this road novel and other characters as merely secondary, such as Francesco ("Maria und ich, wir waren die Protagonisten. Er [Francesco] war eine Nebenfigur und sollte es bleiben" 328), Josef alludes as well to the central thematic focus of the novel, that is, his vying for Maria's attention. These cinematic elements substantiate in stylistic form the fractured psyche of Josef as he searches for meaning and satisfaction in a society in which he feels stifled and unfulfilled as well as the more naïve, independent, and dangerous—to males, at least—Maria. Here, too, the contrasts to their culturally perceived counterparts are extreme. The biblical Joseph, whose anxieties about Mary are calmed after the angel appears to him,

seems fully at ease and content with his life and his "Josephsehe." The image of Mary, too, is one of inner faith and calm and total acceptance of her role as she gives her *fiat* to God.

As the novel begins—the journey has already come to an end—Josef Urban is recounting his story in utmost detail to a highly skeptical Italian commissario. Josef has been detained in Monterchi on suspicion of plotting a terrorist act against the treasured Italian fresco housed there. He feels compelled to explain to the police commissioner the reasons for his mid-life crisis and the familial and existential estrangement he is presently experiencing in order to adequately explain his actions. Both of these personal factors had led him to flee his northern home for Italy, even though the precipitous catalyst for his flight was quite accidental. By pure happenstance, Joseph, separated from his wife and, becoming increasingly anxious about his own forgetfulness and susceptibility to Alzheimers, came upon the Volkswagen Golf with the keys in the door on the parking lot adjacent to Maria's school. He was there to meet his own son after school but, due to his forgetfulness, shows up a week too early to find that his estranged wife has already picked up their son with whom he only has occasional weekend visits. Presented with the proximate opportunity to steal the car, Josef does so only to find himself accompanied by Maria, who has been sleeping on the back seat.

By the end of the novel Josef has confronted Wolf Barbach, the car's owner and Maria's religion teacher, who has followed the young girl's trail in hopes of returning her home safely after he assumes it was she who has driven off with his car. Wolf has his own problems to deal with, since in actuality it is he who has had an ongoing affair with his pupil Maria, which apparently has resulted in her becoming pregnant. When the two male competitors for her affection finally meet at the end of the novel, Josef and Wolf commiserate and drink (*Brüderschaft*) to their similar fates; they identify with one another and their misguided feelings for Maria. During their conversation at the end of the novel Josef makes it clear to Wolf that there was no premeditated, conscious decision that led him to steal the car. In that circumstance and in others more sexually charged, Josef merely found himself repeatedly in the proximate occasion of sin ("occasio proxima") as he and Maria embark on their journey southward. Josef understands Wolf's having been lured into temptation by his young female student and compares his situation with the temptations he encounters at various points as he and

Maria remain in such close physical proximity throughout the journey. Josef has successfully, though somewhat reluctantly, repressed physical expression of his occasional innermost sexual thoughts about Maria, but his resignation is not totally governed by willful action on his part but rather by the fact that Maria's attitude towards him runs hot and cold and eventually frigid. In the end, Josef comes to realize that he and Maria are hardly kindred spirits and will never share in any meaningful relationship. The ultimate irony occurs when Maria abandons Wolf and Josef to apparently run off with the more desirable young Italian Francesco. All Maria has left Josef is some of the money that miraculously fell into their hands like manna from the ATM at the aptly named Banca di Santo Spirito shortly before their journey approaches its conclusion. Given Maria's increasing indifference towards him, Josef is in fact somewhat surprised that she has even considered sharing some of the windfall with him. Rather than totally breaking with him, their fates remain loosely connected and the ambiguity and lack of clarity in their relationship remains, although it is clear that Maria is gone for good with her new companion.

Ironically, Josef's career working for the media had also entered a definite downward spiral, even before his actual trek southward began. His growing forgetfulness had caused a falling out with co-workers and intensified his anxiety. He had become increasingly preoccupied with his own susceptibility to the effects of Alzheimers. His fear of disconnect to his own identity and to the world with which he was familiar drives him to seize the opportunity to steal the teacher's car and embark on a totally new and unexpected adventure in that Italy of such importance to German culture and literature. He becomes a societal dropout, an *Aussteiger*, and simply drives off, but in doing so also becomes a type of entrant (*Einsteiger*) into a new, but equally disquieting lifestyle. The journey itself becomes the goal for Josef. Tellingly though, Josef is not the master of this new-found freedom, as is ironically indicated by the fact that he does not even possess a valid driver's license.

A further ironic novelistic twist to Josef's anxiety about his increasing forgetfulness is the fact that during his interrogation he is able to relate in such clarity all the minute details of his and Maria's journey and of the characters they encounter along their route. Even more so, as his story unfolds before the commissario, Josef is able to nimbly shift focus back and forth in cinematic technique throughout the interwoven

story of himself, Maria, and Wolf. Hensich thus exploits this incongruity to bolster the disconnect between Josef's apparent inability to encounter his true self and his actual mental ability.

Josef's last gasp ends fruitlessly at the end when he buys roses and other gifts in the hope of showering them upon Maria in Monterchi. In actions closely reminiscent of those of Thomas Mann's Gustav Aschenbach in *Death in Venice (Tod in Venedig)*, where the aging artist dyes his graying hair in his homoerotic pursuit of the young boy Tadzio, Josef has primped himself by going to a barber to have his hair and beard trimmed and dyed. Whereas Mann's novella deals with the death and decay of culture and the destructive nature of art in an attempt to forestall imminent death and decay, Josef's actions focus on his personal identity crisis. In the end it is not the living creature Maria but the artistic painting of the Madonna that survives and with which he must be satisfied. For Aschenbach the living image of Tadzio precipitated his ultimate demise. Where and how Josef's life will eventually end we do not know, but for the time being at least he has the painting of the Madonna del Parto to sustain him.

Josef's wife Vera and his son Max seem to have no particular importance for him once he embarks on his journey. He has been separated from his wife after a marriage that he describes as an alternative one. His thoughts center essentially on his own issues and on Maria to whom he develops an ambiguous attachment. Initially, Josef seeks merely to escape his depression. He remains, however, teetering in a balancing act between societal expectation, morality and ethical behavior, fatherly concern for his young companion's welfare and well-being and his desire to break out of the chains that bind him to such conformity.

For Maria, the young 18 year-old student, the journey is an escape specifically from her lover, Wolf Barbach, with whom she has had an ongoing affair, even though for her, too, as for Josef, the adventure through Italy had not been premeditated. Generally, Maria represents youth and youthful unpredictability and rebelliousness.¹² She seeks to escape the restrictive bonds of a society that she and her generation have not fully adapted to and which they will reform and reconstitute in their own way as each successive generation throughout history has done. She is a child of the current generation: her cell phone identifies her as such and plays a critical role in the unfolding of the novel's plot. Maria's dependence on her cell phone is both sign and symbol of her

generation and of its desire to establish itself in competition with that of her parents, her teacher, and her recently found middle-aged accomplice. Maria revolts against her older lover and feels betrayed by him because of his attempts to smooth over the situation with her presumed pregnancy to protect his career and his reputation.

But Maria also reveals an adventurous side beyond the fact that she allowed herself to enter this dangerous liaison with a teacher much older than she. Her adventurousness, comparable to the daredevilry of Henisch's father as a war photographer, is further substantiated at the end of the story when she has taken off with the amorous young Italian Francesco by plane for the Amazon rain forests of South America to pursue and perhaps achieve a dream about which Josef and Wolf can only fantasize. Her unstable family situation has perhaps contributed to her reckless behavior. Her divorced mother seems somewhat less interested in parenting and protecting her still vulnerable teenage daughter than in pursuing her own quest for happiness and fulfillment in a series of relationships with other men. As such, Maria's revolt is, in fact, closely tied to the older generation she seeks to escape; she is, in fact, in some ways condemned to repeating the failures of that older generation but represents a hope for a better future for which she can only pine. In any case, there is little that is totally black and white in any of these relationships. Ambiguity and conflicting emotions and loyalties abound. As such, Maria shares little apparent similarity with the biblical image of the Virgin Mary and that of the cult of the Virgin that developed thereafter.

Fate and a sensation of hanging in the balance are thus part and parcel of Henisch's *modus operandi*. His characters lack the strong-willed determination to direct and control their own destinies. Maria exhibits more control than either Josef or the religion teacher Wolf, whom she now seeks to evade as he follows her trail through Italy. She shows traits of the *femme fatale* but more so of the Fata Morgana, the illusion or illusory prospect, as she willfully pursues her own course at the expense of both Josef and Wolf. They are essentially pawns in her hands and in the hands of fate; they both reveal a certain element of fatalism, even as they attempt to resolve their demons and conflicts.

Josef's conversations with the religion teacher at the end of the narrative, during which they become "brothers in suffering" and come to a mutual understanding of the influence Maria has had on their lives, ironically turns deadly. In a further twist of irony, Josef accidentally

runs over the teacher (with his own car!) and his body falls backwards into the water from the edge where the car was parked. Wolf's death does not represent the death of the father, or of the Holy Spirit by whom the Virgin Mary became pregnant, because it turns out that Maria is not really pregnant. Other than the fact that Wolf's life has come to an end, his fate is not dissimilar to Josef's, as shown by the fact that the two have Wolf "blood brothers." Josef has taken on Wolf's very persona. From the start Josef has been an impostor: he has used the personal identification Wolf had left in the car to check into hotels. After Wolf's death he even writes the letter Wolf intended to send to his spiritual director Pater Schwarz. He becomes Wolf's *Doppelgänger* and subconsciously wishes that he had been the one who had had the affair with Maria.

The end of the novel is significant. While Joseph has failed to catch up with Maria as she flees with Francesco, he does, however, gain access to his substitute Madonna in the form of Piero della Francesca's fresco in Monterchi and ponders the beauty of the eternal feminine—in this case the Madonna, the mother of Christ, pregnant, heavy with child, and yet revealing her earthly attributes in contrast to the idealized heavenly role she represents as the mother of the Savior. Joseph finds a certain comfort in his contemplation of the fresco—eternal truths seem to be revealed in the painting, yet the likelihood of it providing more than temporary relief from the balancing act his life has become is unlikely. Once again with irony, the reader is drawn back to the fatefully placed car with the key in the door that was at his disposal.

As noted above, balancing is also a theme in this work as it is for many of Henisch's other works. A line from *Die kleine Figur meines Vaters* is revealing: "as long as the balancing rod stays horizontal, everything is okay" (172). A sense of security at knowing who one is, even if it is misplaced or misguided, is predicated on this sense of balance. In the case of Josef Urban, it is perhaps a loss of balance and equilibrium that he experiences. He has chosen to break with the normal code of conduct for a person of his age and position. He (and Wolf) has bucked middle-class moral and ethical standards by his behavior. Josef's internal conflict involves his own allegiance to societal norms and morality, on the one hand, and to his desire to escape all the restrictions it entails, on the other. Thus he finds himself constantly at the limits of propriety as he and Maria continue on their journey. Josef's disillusionment and resignation reach their zenith by

the end of the novel, when he apparently accepts the fact that nothing will ever come of his relationship to Maria, either as her protective father figure or closer friend. Instead he is left to pursue and contemplate the fresco of the pregnant Madonna, which he actually gets to see at the end. Unlike the typical tourist or art aficionado who might come to view the fresco, Josef sits in awe of the painting for hours and thus arouses suspicion of having some destructive intent. He remains a Joseph-figure in search of his Madonna.

NOTES

¹ The novel first appeared in 1975 and then in a revised edition in 1987. The English edition, translation and afterword by Anne Close Ulmer, appeared in 1990.

² The original edition appeared in 1991 and a revised edition in 2001.

³ Parenthetically, it can be mentioned that Henisch's most recent novel, *Eine sehr kleine Frau*, goes one step further both by naming a female in the title and by placing her squarely on center stage, although the narrative voice is that of her grandson. Clearly, the title of this latest novel is intertextually connected to the title of his first major success that dealt with his own father in the autobiographical novel *Die kleine Figur meines Vaters*. How this most recent novel further develops material and themes from his earlier work is yet to be studied.

⁴ Paul Jandl, "Von Gottes höherem Humor" in *Neue Züricher Zeitung* (29.11.2005) and <<http://www.lyrikwelt.de/rezensionen/dieschwangeremadonna.htm>>.

⁵ "Ich sehe dich in tausend Bildern / Maria, lieblich ausgedrückt, / Doch keins von allen kann dich schildern, / wie meine Seele dich erblickt..." – Novalis

⁶ "... A broom is drearily sweeping / Up the broken pieces of yesterdays life / Somewhere a queen is weeping / Somewhere a king has no wife / And the wind cries 'Mary'" – Jimi Hendrix

⁷ The picture on the dust jacket of the novel, for example, depicts the irreverent image of Piero della Francesca's Madonna del Parto clutching a cell-phone over her womb in which she is carrying the infant Savior.

⁸ See also Michaela Schmitz, "Das himmlische Schmunzeln—oder über die göttlichen Formen der Ironie."

⁹ *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), a film about Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, the bank robbers who roamed the central United States during the Great Depression. *Lolita* (1962, 1997), a film based on the 1955 novel by Vladimir Nabokov about a sexually precocious young girl and the narrator/protagonist's obsession with her.

¹⁰ The image of a balancing act on a high wire is central to much of Henisch's writing. Consider, for example, the case of Henisch's own father Walter, who was a war photographer for the Nazis, and about whom Henisch's most famous novel, *Die kleine Figur meines Vaters*, revolves. Because of the centrality of balancing between societal norms and expectations and the desire of the individual to express his own personality and individuality, Craig Decker chose to incorporate the phrase "a balancing act" in the title of the anthology about Henisch that he edited. Further examples of characters living on society's fringes include Baron Karl, Jim Morrison, Stein, Pepi Prohaska, Hoffmann. Having studied psychology himself and being from Vienna, where Freud's influence was perhaps inescapable, Henisch himself acknowledges the basic motivations and shared character traits of his many characters, both real and fictional, and in fact exhibits them as well in his own personality and lifestyle.

¹¹ Like in Wenders' film, Henisch's novel deals with Josef's middle-age crisis and similar sense of loss.

¹² "Youth is so very brash and so very 'free' because it is largely ignorant of moral and material restrictions" (Brzovic 49).

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Setting Sail on *As Barcas*: An Exploration of the Compatibility of Propaganda and the Carnavalesque in Three of Gil Vicente's Religious Plays

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Gil Vicente's trilogy of *autos da moralidade*, *As barcas*, embarks on an exploration of life, death, salvation, and damnation and, according to Luis Alborg, is arguably his most important religious work (692). The allegorical triptych was inspired by a number of cultural, historical, and literary factors including Portugal's maritime tradition, Lucian de Samosata's 10th *Dialogue of the Dead* (2 AD), the medieval *Danza general de la muerte*, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, to name a few,¹ and consists of the *Auto da barca do Inferno*, the *Auto da barca do Purgatorio*, and the *Auto de la barca de la Gloria*.² The three works dramatize the final judgment of representative figures and stereotypes from all sectors of early modern Iberian society. An ardent moralist, Vicente uses these plays to comment on the Christian desire for spiritual salvation and the all-too-common unwillingness to lead a virtuous life, illustrating the importance of honest over hypocritical devotional practices. As a social critic, Vicente offers a vehement reproach of contemporary Portuguese society in the sixteenth century, especially with regard to the religious sector. But all of his social commentary is not negative; Anthony Lappin suggests in *Three Discovery Plays* that the first work, *Barca do Inferno*, in fact galvanized the sanctity of the Crusades (8). I would add that Vicente relays a similar message in the *Barca de la Gloria* by underlining the privileged status of high ecclesiastical and noble classes, both in this world and after death. The lower classes, however, are not forgotten as their inclusion in *Barca do Purgatorio* indubitably reflects a certain degree of sympathy from the playwright. On another note, the broad scope of characters in the plays has spawned other critical attention, including Fernanda Bastos Moraes's study "A percepção carnavalesca do mundo no *Auto*