MONIKA FLUDERNIK

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Dynamics and Reversals

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ABSTRACT

A Touch of The Poet employs numerous references to truth and illusion as well as to a series of equivalent oppositional terms. Characters persistently talk about truth and authenticity, and one would therefore surmise that the oppositional structures are resolved at the end of the play. A close analysis of these oppositional terms, however, suggests on the contrary that truth and authenticity are never achieved, that whatever seems to be true is, after all, a mere illusion of authenticity. This interpretation relies on a patient retracing of the various oppositions that are posited in the play, their invariable reversals, and the dynamics of this continual shift in binary oppositions. The present article illustrates these processes on a linguistic level (the web of cross-referential oppositional keywords) and on the level of narrative dynamics. On the latter, Melody's and Sara's dynamic relationship can be seen to trace precisely the same path as positions of truth and falsehood throughout the play, positions that are of course intrinsically linked to Melody's character. It then becomes apparent that the notion of a self (which is by definition authentic, real, and true) has to be abandoned along with the remaining positive terms of the key binary oppositions.

O'Neill's much-neglected[1] masterpiece *A Touch of The Poet* revolves around the central puzzle of Con Melody's identity. Earlier accounts of the play frequently took Melody's peasant mask at the end to signify his return to his true origins—a reading that endorses Melody's own ratiocinations on his new identity. More recently, however, critical opinion has consolidated in the opposite view, taking Sara's estimation of the

[1] Between 1974 and 1988 the MLA Bibliography quotes only eight articles on the play, and most of these are decidedly of inferior merit. This does not include important work on *A Touch of The Poet* included in book-length studies, such as Günter Ahrends, *Traumwelt und Wirklichkeit im Spätwerk Eugene O'Neills* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1978); or Josef Oswald, *'The Discordant, Broken, Faithless Rhythm of Our Time': Eine Analyse der späten Dramen Eugene O'Neills*, Neue Studien zur Anglistik und Amerikanistik 21 (Frankfurt: Lang, 1981). There is some excellent criticism in Travis Bogard, *Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972), Ulrich Halfmann, *'Unreal Realism': O'Neills Dramatisches Werk im Spiegel seiner szenischen Kunst* (Bern: Francke, 1969) and *Eugene O'Neill 1988: Deutsche Beiträge zum 100. Geburtstag des amerikanischen Dramatikers*, ed. U. Halfmann (Tübingen: Narr, 1990); Oswald, *Discordant Rhythm*; James A. Robinson, "Convergences and Divergences: Father and Son in *A Touch of The Poet* and *The Iceman Cometh*," *American Literature* 59 (1987): 323–340; Marianne Rohde, "Bedeutung und innerer Zusammenhang der vier Spätdramen Eugene O'Neills," Diss., Freiburg i. Br., 1960; Rolf Scheibler, *The Late Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, The Cooper Monographs 15 (Bern: Francke, 1970); Timo Tiusanen, *O'Neill's Scenic Images* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1968); and Egil Törnqvist, *A Drama of Souls: Studies in O'Neill's Super-Naturalistic Technique*, Acta Universitatis Uppsaliensis, Historia litterarum 3 (Uppsala: Almqvist & Niksell, 1968). Bogard has a perceptive discussion of the play and of its importance in the cycle, and Ahrends is noteworthy for brilliant analysis.

situation as a starting point. Melody's new peasant self is now generally assumed to be just another mask behind which he hides, another pipe dream that will help him survive.

In this paper I will re-examine the evidence for these two views and analyze a number of additional facets of the play, all of which share the feature of a reversal point at which one concept or quality changes into its opposite. It will be argued that all these features acquire significance in connection with Melody's turn-about and relate to Sara's development as well, particularly to the dynamic relationship between father and daughter. In this, the verbal echoes that punctuate the conceptual structure of the play will be recognized to underlie the dramatic structure of *A Touch of The Poet*, which tells of the progression of the conflict between Sara and her father. It is this conflict which provides most of the tension in the play, and supersedes the superficial interest in the transformations that Melody undergoes in the course of the plot. The father–daughter conflict will eventually explain the deep split within the personalities of both Sara and Melody, and the dynamics engendered by their interaction will moreover throw some light on the problem of Melody's 'true' identity, revealing this entire question to be a misconceived starting-point for an inquiry into the play's significance.

A Touch of The Poet consistently thematizes the question of Melody's true status. In this ongoing debate he is caught in a series of dichotomies which are projected on him by his surroundings, and he ends up assuming these dichotomies in his own definition of himself. Melody, who is different from anybody else in the play, is conceptualized in terms of a true self, a reality of selfhood, which he denies, substituting for it lies of a former dazzling personality, as well as illusions about the continued relevance of his former glory—Melody's characteristic pipe dream. What evil-minded onlookers define as Melody's lies about his non-existent past as an officer and owner of a castle[2] is accepted as true by those that have known him—Nora and Cregan. It is Melody's illusions about his *present* status in life that are the butt of Sara's accusations, and she frequently tones down her judgment, replacing the injurious "lie" with "dream(s)"[3] and a "fairy-tale." (39)

Both Sara and the Irish "riff-raff" (III, 244; *90*),[4] whom she despises as much as does her father, agree in condemning Melody for pretending ("playacting") to be what he is

[2] "Ain't he the lunatic, sittin' like a play-actor in his red coat, lyin' about his battles with the French. . . . may he always be as big a fool as he is this night!" (III; 234–35; *76–77*) Page references in parentheses are to the new American Library edition of the Complete Plays: *Complete Plays 1932–1943*, The Library of America 42 (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988), as well as (italicized page numbers) to *A Touch of The Poet: A Play in Four Acts* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1957).

[3] "Mad dreams" (II, 228; *70*), "dream" (III; 241; *85*), "mad dream", "crazy blather" (III, 242; *86*), and "mad dreams" and "lies" (IV, 263; *114*).

[4] See also, in reference to Yankees, I, 199; *30*. The most common epithet applied to the Irish immigrants is "scum" (the Yankees call them "Micks" [IV, 265; *117*]). Compare I, 194; *22* ("we aren't the ignorant shanty scum he [the Father]'s used to dealing with" [Sara]), I, 199; *30* ("Everywhere the scum rises to the top." [Melody in reference to Andrew Jackson's popularity]), III, 237; *80* (twice), and IV, 277; *133* ("those drunken scum" [Sara]). Gadsby is addressed in this manner, too: "you Yankee scum" [III, 248; *94*]). The Irish themselves are well aware of Melody's contempt for them: ". . . he considers the few Irish around here to be scum beneath his notice." (I, 186; *11*; Maloy); "I'd better warn him not to sneer at the Irish around here and call thim scum." (I, 193; *21*; Nora) Other epithets are "cattle" (II, 215; *51*), "dogs" (III, 235; *77* and III, 246; *93*), and "louts" (III, 237; *79*).

not—be it because he never had the status to which he lays claim, or because he no longer lives in circumstances that would allow him to live "in state" (I, 191; *18*).[5] All parties use essentialist language to define selfhood, and only Sara is split by recognizing both the truth of Melody's former status *and* the incompatibility of his European essentialist concept of gentility with the pragmatic circumstances of the New World, in which money alone constitutes status. It is one of the many ironies of the play that Melody, who had failed to get himself accepted by the Anglo-Irish aristocracy (who rejected claims to equality on the basis of wealth), fails again in the United States because he has lost the money which alone could have guaranteed him a place among the Boston 'aristocrats.' He who has never been a true-born gentleman now reverts to oldtime values of true aristocracy, which remain what they are irrespective of external, and particularly financial, circumstances. With Melody's money gone, his previous identity breaks down—his former social status having relied on his father's wealth alone—and he perpetuates his former self-image by projecting himself as the true-born gentleman he never was, a role that—by old-world standards—is compatible with his reduced circumstances and does not require a reassessment of his social status or psychological identity.

So far I have set out the basic dichotomy of the play, in which Melody is seen as *either* the major of yore (this is how he continues to see himself and for which he is regarded as a liar or a madman by his Irish compatriots) *or* as a common "Mick"—the derogatory epithet that the Boston upper class applies to both Melody and his clients. At the end of the play Melody assumes this injurious image of himself, joining his "good friends" (IV, 279; *136*) in the bar.[6] This does not, however, resolve the conflict for Sara, for whom her father is *neither* the major of yore (although she does not doubt the veracity of his and her mother's accounts of his former self), *nor* is he a mere "Irish shebeen keeper," as he now gives out. Sara acutely senses that Melody's new pose is another mask for an identity that, although it had been elusive when he was still playing the major, could never have been the "leering and slouching" peasant sputtering brogue into which he has now turned.

The dynamics of this schema are most clearly demonstrable from Sara's attempts to influence her father. From repeated frustration and anguish over her father's behavior, Sara's latent hostility comes to a head on the issue of her love for Simon, a conflict which is created by Melody's Munchhausian plan to negotiate with Mr. Harford for a proper settlement for his daughter. In the course of the ensuing confrontations, the binary conceptualizations that Sara projects on Melody are evoked at key moments of Sara's embittered *agon* with her father. At these points Sara repeatedly punctures Melody's self-image. Her taunts throw Melody off balance and cut him to the quick.[7] Melody is mostly able to control his responses, as he does, for instance, when Sara anguishedly

[5] Compare also "in style" (I, 211; *46*).

[6] These "good friends" were of course formerly referred to as "scum" and "dogs" (see note 4 above). Sara sarcastically called them "gintlemen" (III, 236; *79*, and I, 209; *42*). Note also that, at this juncture in act IV, Melody characterizes his former gentlemanly life as a "lonely dog's life" (IV, 278; *134*).

[7] *"Sara has entered from right as he begins this longing invocation of old hunting days. She stands behind his chair, listening contemptuously. He suddenly feels her presence and turns his head. When he catches the sneer in her eyes, it is as if cold water were dashed in his face"* (III, 236; *79*).

implores him to be the man he seems to be—a plea she utters when she reacts to his impressive posture in uniform:

> Oh, Father, why can't you ever be the thing you can seem to be? *(A sad scorn comes into her voice.)* The man you were. I'm sorry I never knew that soldier. I think he was the only man who wasn't just a dream. (II, 228; *69*)

However, when Melody realizes that he has missed Deborah and receives Sara's contemptuous assessment of Debora's possible reaction to his resurrection of the major, he can no longer control himself, and the tension that Sara has set loose shows in the damage wrought on the back of a chair (II, 229–230; *71*).

Sara's acute awareness of the ridiculous figure her father cuts derives from her much more pragmatic nature—in contrast to Melody and the Harfords there is no "touch of the poet" about her.[8] Yet, on the other hand, Melody represents something that she aspires to herself and, although she does not acknowledge it, it is this very thing that she loves in Simon. Her assessment of her father is thus split between the more pragmatic view according to which his gentlemanly behavior is "a fake and a lie," and, on the other hand, her admiration for what he used to represent. Thus at one moment she condemns his gentlemanly habits as pretense and calls his present low status "the living truth" (I, 209; *39*), whereas in the next, she sees Melody's present image of the major as something he merely *seems* to be but is not, although the illusion in the past once corresponded to the truth. In both versions does she cling to Melody's own essentialist explanation of his intrinsic difference from his contemporaries.

It is this general set-up which allows Sara to take her father's place at the end of the play. Unlike her mother and Melody's compatriots, she alone understands Melody's radical reversal to be not a return to his real self, but a final resignation to hostile circumstances. The fourth act is noteworthy for the way it juxtaposes and manipulates the dichotomies that I have analyzed. Shifts between 'truth' and lie, sanity and craziness, illusion dream and reality, play-acting and 'being oneself' follow one another in quick succession. Contrary to what one would expect, there is no clean and easy transformation of reactions to Melody, veering from contempt and disbelief early in the play to pure relief and cheering at the end. When Melody first returns from the battle and starts to speak in brogue, his entourage is at first amazed and shocked. They believe him to have gone crazy, thinking that he, that is to say what they took to be his real self, is dead. Thus all the injurious epithets that used to be applied to him in acts I to III, epithets attacking his gentlemanly self, are now employed to question his new peasant self:

> God preserve us, it's crazed he is! (IV, 267; *119*; Nora)
> It's mad he's grown entirely! ... I'm no damned keeper av lunatics! (IV, 271; *124–125*; Cregan)
> He's play-acting to amuse himself. (IV, 272; *126*; Sara)
> Sure, he must have gone mad altogether! (IV, 280; *137*; Nora)[9]

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[8] Albert Bermel, "A Crutch of the Poet," *The Eugene O'Neill Newsletter* (Spring 1987): 10–14, claims that there is. The epithet is never used to designate her, however, although Sara admittedly is shown as a dreamer (of love, of riches) and certainly falls prey to her father's pride.

[9] Compare also: "mad blather" (IV, 269; *122*; Cregan); "Father, will you stop this mad game you're playing?" and "I'll make you stop your dirty brogue and your play-acting" (IV, 274; *128–129*; Sara); and "He kilt the poor mare, the mad fool!" (IV, 271; *125*; Cregan)

Hence what we get is an initial state of presumed falsehood and deception (Melody as gentleman), which is revealed to have been true at some point in the past. Once Melody has changed into a "leering and slouching peasant," this former gentlemanly garb temporarily appears to all concerned to have been the real truth about Melody, who seems to have lost his true gentlemanly self. By contrast, what was formerly considered to be the (desired) reality (Melody as one of the "Micks") now transpires as a fake and madness to the very people that had kept denouncing his gentlemanly role, but immediately afterwards this apparent fake re-develops into the acknowledged 'truth.' Once Melody has made it clear that he himself regards his former role as a fake, everybody except Sara is happy to agree with this. Melody is able to exchange his hell of 'loneliness' for becoming one with his compatriots, and his turn-about involves taking up the point of view of the crowd.

Instead of A changing into its opposite (minus A, so to speak), we thus get a much more complicated sequence of reactions to Melody's transformation, and this is further complicated by Sara's reactions, which are different from those of Cregan and Nora. Cregan's evidence at all points here is a valuable corrective to Sara's reactions. When Melody is brought in looking half-dead and crazed, Sara initially disbelieves this evidence: "It's only what I told you to expect. A crazy row—and now he's paralyzed drunk" (IV, 264; *115*). When Cregan tells the tale of their adventure, she is at first contemptuous of it ("The famous duelist—in a drunken brawl with butlers and coachmen!" [266; *118*]) but also *"torn by conflicting emotions"* (266–267; *119*), mortified that her father has allowed himself to be insulted by Harford's servants (266; *118*). This conflict continues until the end of act IV, where it is still unresolved. Thus when Melody takes up her previous sneer about the duelist demeaning himself,

> Bravely done, Major Melody. The Commander of the Forces honors your exceptional gallantry![10] . . . Cursing like a drunken, foul-mouthed son of a thieving shebeen keeper who sprang from the filth of a peasant hovel with pigs on the floor . . . . (IV, 267; *119*)

she is at first startled by his acknowledgment of her view of the matter (*"startled and wondering"*) and *"angry pity"* impels her towards him (ibid.). As at the beginning of act II, when she sees her father slumped at the table, bereft of his customary shield of gentlemanly veneer, her first reaction is pity (II, 209; *44*). This parallels Melody's true reaction to Nora's kindnesses in act I, gratitude and love, which his gentlemanly self does not allow him to acknowledge.[11] Both have to suppress their human reaction in the service of their ideal of honor and pride. And Sara here hardens to diagnose: "He isn't crazed, Mother. He's come to his senses for once in his life!" (267; *119*) Not only is this true—Melody *is* acknowledging that his self-image has been shattered by the

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[10] Note the key words *honor* and *gallantry*, which here means 'bravery,' but of course hints at Melody's former gallantry with women.

[11] Compare I, 199; *29*: "MELODY *(his expression changes and a look of real affection comes into his eyes. He reaches out a shaking hand to pat her shoulder with an odd, guilty tenderness. He says quietly and with genuine contrition).*" See also I, 200; *31* ["*(He stops a little shamefacedly, but Nora gives no sign of offence. He takes her hand and pats it gently—avoiding her eyes.)* You have the kindest heart in the world, Nora. And I—*(His voice breaks.)*"], as well as I, 202; *32* ["*(stares at her—again he is moved . . .)*"], I, 202; *33* ("*deeply moved*"), and his acknowledgment of his real feelings towards Nora: IV, 276; *131*.

brawl into which Cregan led him unawares. The phrase is also an echo of one of Sara's earlier wishes for her father to face his circumstances:

> All I hope now is that whatever happened wakes him from his lies and mad dreams so he'll have to face the truth of himself in that mirror. (IV, 263; *114*)

Compare also:

> If you ever dared face the truth, you'd hate and despise yourself! *(Passionately.)* All I pray to God is that someday when you're admiring yourself in the mirror something will make you see at last what you really are! That will be revenge in full for all you've done to Mother and me! (III, 237; *80*)
> Father! Will you never let yourself wake up—not even now when you're sober, or nearly? (I, 207; *39*)

Sara's ambivalent reactions continue to fight between her approval of Melody's realistic avowal of failure and her feeling of humiliation at it, and these sentiments surface in her wavering between a reasonable view of the brawl and the vindictiveness she harbors against the Harfords, an ambiguity that comes to the surface again and again:

> So she was sneering, was she [Deborah]? I don't blame her! I'm glad you've been taught a lesson! *(Then vindictively.)* But I've taught her one, too. She'll soon sneer from the wrong side of her mouth! (IV, 267; *119*)

Sara flatters herself for having beaten the Harfords at their own game, and in a much more effective manner than her father.[12]

> I can revenge my own insults, and I have! I've beaten the Harfords—and he's only made a fool of himself for her to sneer at. But I've beaten her and I'll sneer last! (IV, 269; *121*)

Beating the Harfords—this is Sara's own peasant self speaking, the scheming for wealth and power, the *ressentiment* against the wealthy and true-born. This kind of anger is evinced by Melody, too, not only against the Yankees, but also against the English (I, 207; *32*), although, within his gentlemanly pose, he also espouses their aristocratic point of view. Yet, at the same time, Sara's genuine love for Simon and her recognition of the reasonableness of Melody's punishment, her recognition, in particular, that she herself is guilty of harboring the very pride on account of which she so frequently castigates her father—all this leads her to an involuntary retraction of her exclamation: "*(She pauses, a hard, triumphant smile on her lips. It fades. She gives a little bewildered laugh.)* God forgive me, what a way to think of—I must be crazy, too" (IV, 269; *121*). Note that she calls herself *crazy*. This is precisely the epithet that she used to apply to her father when he was in the grip of his own gentlemanly pride.

There is an exchange in positions here not only with regard to the epithet 'crazy' and other statements about what is palpably true on the stage (Melody's self-recognition of having been a liar, a fool, and a dreamer). The exchange of roles between Sara and Melody is signaled also by the word "beaten," which recurs in reference to Melody:

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[12] It is significant that her actual strategy to beat Deborah is precisely the one that Melody as peasant suggests she should use. Formerly, of course, Melody the gentleman refused his consent to a possible marriage even if Sara were pregnant (III, 243; *88*), but later he endorses his father's morals, advising her to sleep with Simon (IV, 274; *129*).

> CREGAN *(enthusiastically)*. To the day and yourself, God bless you, Con!
> *(He tries to touch brims with Melody's glass, but Melody holds his glass away and draws himself up haughtily.)*
> MELODY *(with cold rebuke)*. I said, to the day and your good health, *Corporal Cregan.*
> CREGAN *(for a second is angry—then he grins and mutters admiringly)*. Be God, it's you can BATE the world and never let it change you! *(Correcting his toast with emphasis.)* To the day and yourself, *Major Melody.*
> MELODY *(touches his glass to Cregan's—graciously condescending)*. Drink hearty, Corporal. (II, 230–231; *72*; capitals added)

Here the notion of beating is *active*, and this is turned into the passive when Cregan tells of their brawl with Harford's servants: "His pride'd nivir forgive us if we let thim see him dead bate like this." (IV, 264; *116*); "You're taking it cool enough, and you seein' the marks av the *batin'* we got!" (265; *117*) So whereas Melody is finally beaten, Sara takes over his active quarrel by trying to beat the Harfords at their own game. Being beaten appears to be the equivalent of resigning oneself to one's inevitable fate—a doom Melody incurs at the end of the play: "SARA *(dully—aloud to herself rather than to her mother)*. No. He'll never be. He's beaten at last and he wants to stay beaten" (IV, 279; *136*). Sara, on the contrary, is still young and active and full of illusions: she will not be beaten until the end of *More Stately Mansions*, when she offers Simon to her step-mother in order to save his sanity.[13]

Sara is the first to recognize that Melody has finally faced his inauthenticity. In spite of this, her perception of what he may be doing when proceeding towards the barn is warped by the low opinion she has of her father, and by her anger and humiliated pride. She first believes that he will only visit "his sweetheart the mare"—a thought that revives her earlier mortification when Melody taunted her with being inferior to the thoroughbred (III, 238; *82*). In her present mood she is thus unable to perceive that the most gentlemanly thing Melody could do would be to put an end to his life. Since the gentleman in Melody has for her so long been nothing but a contemptible mask, she can believe neither in his actual practice of gentlemanly standards (indeed, he flouts those standards continually in his behavior throughout acts I to III[14]), nor, later, in a true conversion of her father into a real Irish peasant (although here, too, her perceptions are keener than those of Nora and his compatriots). Whereas Nora immediately thinks he is going to shoot someone (and Cregan probably suspects it will be Melody himself), Sara, on the contrary, evinces a fleeting moment of triumph: "... *bursts out with a strange triumphant pride.*) Then he's not beaten!"—only to recognize her folly within the next second:

> *(Suddenly she is overcome by a bitter, tortured revulsion of feeling.)* Merciful God, what am I thinking? As if he hadn't done enough to destroy—*(Distractedly.)* Oh, the mad fool! I wish he was—" (IV, 270; *123*)

[13] "No! Wait! Listen! Deborah! I give up! I admit I'm *beaten* now! I'll pay you any price you ask, if only—" (*More Stately Mansions* IV, ii; *Complete Plays* 540 f.; *More Stately Mansions: The Unexpurgated Edition*, ed. Martha Gilman Bower [New York: Oxford UP] 291; my emphasis). With these words Sara gives up Simon to her rival Deborah—a sacrifice prefigured at the end of *A Touch of The Poet*, when her offer to give up Simon almost prevails upon Melody.

[14] He is contemptuous of everybody, rude to Nora, shouts and swears, lames the mare, and tries to seduce Deborah.

The suppressed word here is "dead"—a key word of the play. Here, as in other respects, Sara proves to be prophetic, since she anticipates Melody's developments by her wishes and actions. Not only had she wished for him to wake up and recognize his own self, as we have seen above; she has even actively (and equally involuntarily) brought this change about. At this moment of dramatic tension, too, her involuntary wish to get rid of him—which is really a repression of his pride in herself and an attempt to heal the split in her own personality by rejecting the part of her that exists outside herself—gets the upper hand in her, and blinds her to the true drama of the situation. And although what she had so distractedly wished for does not occur in actual fact—Melody returns safe and sound as far as his physical shape is concerned—she has nevertheless actually achieved what she wanted, the death of his fake personality. As she earlier implored him to, he has now finally "faced the truth" and "woken up" and "become sober." Melody's illusionary gentlemanly image, which had repeatedly been referred to as a dead lie, is now dead in actual fact, a consequence of the killing of the mare and of Melody's transformation into a peasant. This death of Melody's former self is emphasized in the text in several places.

> Look at the dead face on him, Sara. He's like a corpse. (IV, 272; *126*; Nora)
> . . . But he's dead now, and his last bit av lyin' pride is murthered and stinkin'. (IV, 273; *127*; Melody)
> *He aims it* [the pistol] *at Sara's heart, like an automaton, his eyes as cold,* deadly, *and merciless as they must have been in his duels of long ago.* (IV, 275; *130*; my emphasis)
> . . . You'll be as dead to yourself after, as if you'd shot yourself along with the mare! (IV, 278; *134*; Sara)[15]

In parallel to the truth vs. lying dreams/craziness dichotomy, the key word *dead* evokes the "living" truth that had been apostrophized earlier. *Dead* and *beaten* therefore demonstrably signal the opposite of Melody's gentlemanly role. When Melody is dead, he is beaten at his game of playing the old major, and this defeat is the death also of the gentlemanly pride and honor that Sara cherished too:

> He's beaten at last and he wants to stay beaten. Well, I did my best. Though why I did, I don't know. I must have his crazy pride in me. *(She lifts her head, her face hardening—bitterly.)* I mean, the later Major Melody's pride. I mean, I did have it. Now it's dead—thank God,—and I'll make a better wife for Simon. (IV, 279–280; *136*; Sara)

Her final distress at Patch Riley's tune signals her continued investment in the dream of her father's past, a past that she has never experienced as a living truth:

[15] See also: "*His eyes are empty and lifeless*" (IV, 264; *115*); "dead bate like this" (264; *116*; Cregan); "*His expression remains blank and dead*" (265; *116*); "that crazy dead look in his eyes" (268; *121*; Nora); "There wasn't much pride left in the auld lunatic, anyway, and seeing her die made an end av him. So he didn't bother shooting himself, because it'd be a mad thing to waste a good bullet on a corpse!" (273; *127*; Melody); "Begorra, if that wasn't the mad Major's ghost speakin'!" (273; *128*; Melody); "Speaking' av the departed, may his soul roast in hell . . ." (276; *131*; Melody); "God rest his soul in the flames av tormint! (*Roughly.*) But to hell wid the dead" (278; *133*; Melody); "I warned ye what ye'd get if ye kept on interferin' and tryin' to raise the dead" (279; *135*; Melody); "I know you won't try raisin' the dead any more." (ibid.); ". . . the late Major Melody's pride. I mean, I did have it. Now it's dead—thank God,—and I'll make a better wife for Simon" (279–280; *136*; Sara); "Faith, Patch Riley don't know it but he's playing a requiem for the dead. . . . Why do I mourn for him?" (281; *137*; Sara)

> Faith. Patch Riley don't know it but he's playing a requiem for the dead. *(Her voice trembles.)* May the hero of Talavera rest in peace! *(She breaks down and sobs, hiding her face on her mother's shoulder--bewilderedly.)* But why should I cry, Mother? Why do I mourn for him? (IV, 280–281: *137*)

Melody's as well as Sara's conflicts can only be solved through death, they both realize, or by a semblance of death. Melody appears to win over Sara when she finally has to acknowledge his wish to stay beaten and to recognize her own share in his pride. Indeed, as Melody insists, his old self is dead, and Sara is warned twice not to "raise the dead" (IV, 279; *135*). His victory is however undermined by her continued ambivalence about the standards of honor and pride which they used to share. Thus, although she realizes that his transformation is final, and although she is aware that the new situation will be best for her mother as well as for her love for Simon, she nevertheless mourns for her father's elusive gentlemanly self.

Sara's reactions are hence exactly the opposite of everybody else's: disbelief and scorn when the others are frightened; terror and belief when the others take Melody's new self to be an enjoyable fairy-tale and madness (as does Nora [IV, 280; *137*]). Contrary to Sara's own statements, she does not entirely root out her father's pride in herself but remains divided and in conflict, whereas Melody himself has earned peace of mind in his assumed personality. The extent of her alterity is apparent particularly in the contrast to Corporal Cregan, who (like Nora) has experienced the former major as a living person and not a mere theatrical role. Cregan's function in the play is a valuable one, since he represents what is best among the Irish (having true admiration for Melody, and not merely sponging on him), and he is able to vouchsafe for the reality of Melody's defamed past. Furthermore, as I have hinted above, he proves an important corrective also to Sara's reactions to Melody (Nora's are all too stereotypical), again vouchsafing for what has happened off-stage and, more significantly, reinterpreting Melody's tearing off of his gentlemanly mask in terms quite the opposite from Sara's. Cregan is unable to appreciate Melody's descent into the vulgar when he enthusiastically relates the details of the battle royal with Harford's servants and the police, although he does admire his superior conduct ("airs av a lord"). However, although Cregan had accepted (and even half admired) Melody's persistent clinging to gentlemanly ideals (as in the toast scene quoted earlier), he is unable to follow Melody into the honor/pride/status symbol level of this code, and therefore puzzled by his "crazy blather" "av the pigs and his father one minute, and his pride and honor and his mare the next" (IV, 267; *120*). It is significant here that the word "blather" (and "blarney") is one consistently used by Sara to describe Melody's linguistic posturing as the gentleman (and most injuriously applied by Deborah when castigating him for his seductive speech: "Is this—what the Irish call blarney, sir?"—II, 218; *55*); "your blather about loving horses" (III, 237; *79*); "Och, what crazy blather!" (III, 242; *86*) Melody takes up this word to incriminate his former self after his conversion, characterizing his former self as "pretindin' he's a gintleman, blatherin' about pride and honor" (IV, 273; *127*). It is for the likes of Cregan and Nora that Melody has to explain the significance of his killing of the mare, an action that Cregan can only put down to sheer lunacy:

> CREGAN *(dumps Melody down on the nearest chair at left of the small table-- roughly, his voice trembling)*. Let you sit still now, Con Melody, and behave like a gintleman! (IV, 271; *124*)

In spite of the difference in individual reactions to Melody's turn-about, however, it is quite apparent to all the family and Cregan that Melody's new peasant personality is an assumed one, since Melody never was a mere peasant, having received a gentlemanly education by his father and lived the life of a gentleman, too. The same is true for Melody's brogue, which corresponds to his 'natural' language as much (that is to say, as little) as Melody's new peasant self seems to define whatever one may deem to be his 'real' personality.

The uneasy shifts in Melody's identity and the other characters' reactions to them are mirrored not only in the use of the word *dead*, which refers in turn to, first, Melody's illusions, then to his dejected state of resignation when he faces the fake he has been, and finally to his suppressed past and the self that belonged with it. Similar shifts in meaning occur in connection with the key words *honor* and *pride*. Thus Melody's gentlemanly honor and pride are contrasted with Nora's pride in her love. In Sara these two kinds of pride interact and clash. While it is pride in her love for Simon that induces Sara to stand up against her father at the end of act III, it is pride in her heritage and pride of her father that impels her to sacrifice Simon if only Melody would be himself once more. And Melody's new peasant pride in his daughter's worldly advancement clashes with all of these meanings in a calculated effect of producing shock and disbelief:

> Musha, but that's kind of him! [of Simon to marry Sara] Be God, we ought to be proud av our daughter, Nora. Lave it to her what she wants by hook or crook. And won't we be proud watchin' her rise in the world till she's a grand lady! (IV, 275; *130*)[16]

This is immediately juxtaposed with Simon's pride:

> She'll have some trouble rootin' out his dreams. He's set in his proud, noble ways, but she'll find the right trick! I'd lay a pound, if I had one, to a shilling she'll see the day when she'll wear fine silks and drive in a carriage wid a naygur coachman behind spankin' thoroughbreds, her nose in the air; and she'll live in a Yankee mansion, as big as a castle, on a grand estate av stately woodland and soft green meadows and a lake. (IV, 275–276; *130–131*)

The mansion and castle as well as the thoroughbreds are here loaded keywords, implying another revolution in the application of these words. Metaphorically speaking, this is the castle that Ned Melody bought and that Sara was born in, and it has repeatedly been contrasted with the peasant hovel that Con's father was born and raised in and which, like the Irish scum of his clientèle, Melody thoroughly despises and contemns in his attempts to repress his true lowly origins. The reality of Melody's present circumstances, however, does not tally with either the apostrophized "peasant hovel," nor with the castle or mansion that Melody once used to inhabit.[17] Like its host, the tavern has seen better days and preserves an atmosphere of shabby gentility (I, 183; *7*). Melody both boasts of having possessed gentility (symbolized by the castle as now by the mare) and scorns it in the Harfords (their mansion does not compare with his own former

[16] See also: "Be the living god, it's me should be proud this night that one av the Yankee gintry has stooped to be seduced by my slut av a daughter!" (IV, 275; *130*)

[17] Compare: "MELODY (*calmly*). . . . Who is he [Harford] but a money-grubbing trader? I would remind him that I was born in a castle and there was a time when I possessed wealth and position, and an estate compared to which any Yankee upstart's home in this country is but a hovel stuck in a cabbage patch. I would remind him that you, my daughter, were born in a castle!" (III, 241; *86*)

glory), the latter move of course covering over his very real desire to be like the Harfords and own their wealth. Melody therefore wishes for nothing as much as for Sara to become one of the Harfords, their equal, reinstating her in her 'true' origins which are his own. In this connection there is of course a raging battle between Melody's megalomania and Sara's commonsense estimation of the situation:

> SARA . . . I suppose it would never occur to you that old Harford might not think it an honor to have his son marry your daughter. (III, 241; *85*)

Note the use of *honor* in Sara's remark. Like *pride* this concept undergoes several reversals of meaning and eventually comes to signify an ethic the very opposite from the ruling gentleman code:

> MELODY . . . you must make the young Yankee gintleman have you in his bed, and after he's had you, weep great tears and appeal to his honor to marry you and save yours. (IV, 274; *129*)
> And let me hear no more gab out of you about not marryin' the young lad upstairs. Be Jaysus, haven't ye any honor? Ye seduced him and ye'll make an honest gentleman av him . . . . (IV, 279; *135*)[18]

Note also the ironic use of "honest gentleman" for Simon, which turns around the tables in more than one way. Of course, in the gentlemanly code of Melody's initial pose it was Sara's virginity, her remaining an "honest woman," that Melody was most concerned with. The epithet seems to allude to the weaker and endangered party only, since Simon was high in Melody's estimation early in the play and has lost this place by the point of the above exchange. It needs to be noted additionally, as I will illustrate in more detail below, that Simon becomes confined to the role of the woman, the bride, the fiancée, so that this wording, too, indicates his feminization and marginalization, a fact more than apparent from the plot, of course, where Simon never appears on stage and is seduced by Sara rather than the other way round.

When we review the results of our discussion so far, how dichotomies become interchangeable referring to the same and different entities in neck-break succession, we must conclude that indeed things no longer are what they seem to be. Melody never really was what he represented—at least on a synchronic level. Yet Sara, like everybody else, continues to believe in an essential self: "Oh, Father, I can't bear—Won't you be yourself again?" (IV, 277; *132*) At the end of the play, when Melody toasts Andrew Jackson, Sara realizes: "I heard someone. But it wasn't anyone I ever knew or want to know" (280; *136*).[19] In all these transformations and shifts the '"real" truth,' Melody's 'real' self, remains elusive and cannot be grasped. It constitutes a virtual existence beyond the realm of social and moral constructions that are being projected throughout the play. Like Sara's "I wish he was—", in which the key and pivot of the phrase remains unexpressed but nevertheless exists in space, Melody's true identity, around which the

[18] Compare also Melody's uses of *honor* in the conversation with Gadsby, in which the term is first used politely (the "honor" of Gadsby's visit) but later acquires sinister overtones (the "honor" of suggesting that Sara could be paid off). For a detailed argument with textual quotations see Monika Fludernik, "Byron, Napoleon, and Thorough-Bred Mares: Symbolism and Semiosis in *A Touch of The Poet*," *Sprachkunst* 21.2 (1990): 335–352.

[19] Compare her earlier lament at her father's lack of identity with the glorious soldier of yore (II, 228; *69*; quoted above).

various poses and views of him revolve, remains an absent entity, a ghost that comes to haunt him briefly when he relates how he killed the mare. This ghost is Melody's past, and it is this noble past as a soldier and duelist, however much of a sham that past was from the point of view of Melody's origins, that asserts itself as a reality beyond grasp throughout *A Touch of The Poet*. Its palpability relies on Cregan's evidence and on Melody's continued impressive handsomeness, particularly when dressed up in his uniform. It manifests itself also in his dashing charm with Deborah, even if his behavior at the same time approaches the burlesque or even ridiculous. The most fascinating feature of this past is its tangible existence *on stage* in all the moments when Melody gives us an indication of what he may formerly have been. Melody's "airs av a lord" on Harford's doorstep are only Cregan's impressions, but they are more than warranted by the major's resurrection when he nearly kills Sara:

> MELODY *(his body stiffens on his chair and the coarse leer vanishes from his face. It becomes his old face. His eyes fix on her in a threatening stare. . . . Still keeping his eyes fixed on hers, he begins ro rise from his chair, his right hand groping along the table top until it clutches the dueling pistol. He aims it at Sara's heart, like an automaton, his eyes as cold, deadly, and merciless as they must have been in his duels of long ago. Sara is terrified but she stands unflinchingly.)* (IV, 275; *129–130*)

Melody does not speak at this point—his past resurrects itself as a *silent* thing that exists—and, because it is silent, does not have more than chimeric existence. Sara, in this pantomime, clearly stands in for her father's former antagonists. Melody's transferral of his former pride on Sara is indicated in the mime, but, more than anything else, this silent re-enactment of Melody's courageous and mercilessly unflinching "gallantry" at last shows us the ghost which has been haunting Melody (and the play) from the beginning. This ghost comes across as different from all its evocations which we have witnessed—the handsome soldier, the gallant, the gentleman. It proves Melody to have been a true gentleman after all—in contradistinction to cowardly Harford, who hides behind his servants. This is Melody the man, in his most essential pose, that of confronting death with open eyes and calm indifference, and no longer Melody the clown, Melody who relies on his castle, his uniform or his mare to signify what he is or wishes to be. Yet, significantly, this Melody—the pivot of the play through which all the other actions and the opinions that are voiced become structured and comprehensible—is a mere ghost. His identity is a silent and re-enacted (hence non-original) entity, or, rather, non-entity in the play. The 'truth' and 'reality' that are talked about so much are vouchsafed to us in silence, in a dream only.

I would like to remain with this key scene for a moment, since this is also the climax in the dynamics of Sara's relationship with her father. As we have already noted, Sara throughout functions as her father's antagonist, his bad conscience and his temptress (to resume the old role). She succeeds in puncturing Melody's roles again and again, and she is able to do so because she has come to stand in the position of Melody's similar, his *alter ego*. Her taunts cut Melody to the quick, and she throws him off balance not only by her mockery (II, 229; *70–71*[20]) but even more effectively when she pleads with him out of her love, as for instance when she exclaims that he has gone "stark mad" (I, 207, *39*) or anguishedly implores him to be the man he seems to be

[20] Note also (III, 236; *79*), (III, 243; *88*), (III, 250; *98*), (IV, 272; *126*), and (IV, 275; *129*).

(II, 228: *69*). After Melody's *peripeteia* it is again Sara who besieges his new role and provokes him to nearly kill her as an impersonation of the ghost of his former self. Here Sara and the mare come to stand for different versions of Melody's self, for reminders of his past pride and glory. In fact, both Nora and Sara have been superseded in Melody's affections by his status symbol, the mare, whose invariable alignment with Deborah, Simon, and well-breeding is more than a coincidence.[21] In act IV Sara almost functions as a temptress to what Melody now regards as his better self—an aspect that is reinforced by Melody's repeated reference to Sara as a "slut." Earlier on, indulging in this epithet was for him an easy way to visit his hatred for Nora's low origins on his daughter, yet he also literalizes the metaphor when he later tauntingly and then seriously urges the role on Sara (cf., e.g., III, 250; 98).[22] It is also Melody who finally signals that Sara has assumed his own former self[23] by applying the term of opprobrium to her misplaced pride: "Don't put on airs loike the late lamented auld liar and lunatic" (IV, 272–73; *127*)—a rebuke that additionally acknowledges his own former pretenses, when he "spouted Byron to pretend himself was a lord wid a touch av the poet" (IV, 277; *133*).

This tug of war between Melody and his daughter, which is really a fight between two equally proud contenders for the title of secure selfhood (which both locate in their pride), constitutes the true rhythm of the play and overlays the plot structure. The conflict is symbolically complicated by Melody's preference of the mare (and of Simon) over his wife and daughter, so that Sara is also, on one level, fighting for her father's love, and fighting *against* Simon. The spirited *agon* between father and daughter, on yet another level, goes to the very heart of the questions of being and seeming and links all the major key motifs—love, pride, honor, and truth. This is so from the thematic perspective, since Melody's identity, the truth about him, is so explicitly at stake in most of the exchanges. Moreover, the significance of the key motifs is further strengthened by the recurrence of the same key words at the height of these exchanges. It is by attacking Melody verbally, by forcing him to be true to himself, by defining himself in terms of the dichotomies that his compatriots as well as she herself project on him, it is by these linguistic strategies that the dynamics and tensions of the play are made most explicit, and they revolve not only around the psychological problems of the two protagonists, but quite insistently emphasize the symbolic level of the dichotomies them-

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[21] Compare also Fludernik, "Byron." The father–daughter contrast of course lends itself to a number of symbolizations. Thus Rohde 169 interprets it as indicative of the conflict between European romance (idealism, Melody) and American materialism (Sara), an identification that is only tangentially relevant to the present discussion.

[22] The epithet of course recurs in *More Stately Mansions*, where both Deborah and Simon cast Sara in the role of a whore. There is little to wonder at in this comparison since *More Stately Mansions* clearly shows the force of the fairy-tale, with Deborah as the evil witch, and Sara can easily be reread as the princess (cf. Riley's loving epithet for Sara, the "fairy princess" [I, 208; *41*]) exiled among the peasants, a nightmare from which she is rescued by Prince Charmion in the guise of Simon the poet. If Sara originally prostituted her love for Simon for the desired re-acquisition of her father's former social position, as he had prostituted his former dreams for love of her, prostitution becomes a very real theme in *More Stately Mansions* in Simon's marriage as well as in Deborah's daydreams which give vent to her repressed sexuality and abjured greed for power.

[23] Rohde 170 notes that Sara takes over the role of her father ("in die Rolle des Vaters geschlüpft").

selves. In these key moments of the play Sara is the aggressor, and she repeatedly provokes Melody into reactions of fury or anguish, destroying his studied gentlemanly pose. Early in the play Melody is always able to regain his poise, asserting control over his spontaneous reactions.[24] Yet Sara's pleas and provocations increase in intensity and elicit stronger and less easily controllable eruptions on the part of her father:

> SARA. Furthered my interests by giving her [Deborah] another reason to laugh up her sleeve at your pretenses? *(With angry scorn, lapsing into broad brogue.)* Arrah, God pity you! *(She turns her back on him and goes off, right. Melody stands gripping the back of the chair at the foot of the table in his big, powerful hands in an effort to control himself. There is a crack as the chair back snaps in half.)* (II, 229–230; *71*)

At the end of his anniversary feast Melody revenges himself for Sara's repeated puncturings of his role of the polished gentleman by turning the tables on her. He refuses to allow himself to be provoked by her (*"But Melody suppresses any angry reaction."* [III, 237; *79*]) and deeply wounds her with his remarks on her inferior peasant hands and ankles (III, 238–39; *82*). He follows this up with the deadly thrust about having refused the consent to the marriage between his peasant slut of a daughter and Simon Harford the gentleman. Though Sara again ultimately manages to retaliate in kind, this time he keeps complete control of himself and parries the charge with equally lethal shot:

> SARA. It's the dirty hut in which your father was born and raised you're remembering, ain't it?
> MELODY *(stung to fury, glares at her with hatred. His voice quivers but is deadly quiet).* Of course, if you trick Harford into getting you with child, I could not refuse my consent. *(Letting go, he bangs his fist on the table.)* No, by God, even then, when I remember my own experience, I'll be damned if I could with a good conscience advise him to marry you!
> . . .
> SARA *(glaring back at him with hatred).* You drunken devil! *(She makes a threatening move towards him, raising her hand as if she were going to slap his face—then controls herself and speaks with quiet, biting sarcasm.)* (III, 243; *88*)

Significantly it is Sara who now has to control herself, but the scene is much more interesting from another perspective. Sara here threatens to slap Melody's face, the typical gesture of initiating a duel. The cause of the quarrel, as in a duel, is a love affair, and Sara and Melody are indeed (symbolically) fighting over the object of this love affair, Simon Harford. Simon here comes to stand for the passive object of sexual and legal possession, the woman. As in a real duel, this object of contention is not present on the scene of bloodshed. I have noted earlier that Simon throughout the play stays in the position of the feminine subject, being aligned with the mare and his mother, Deborah Harford. Sara is justly jealous of the noble beast, the mare, since its good breeding, as well as Simon's status as a gentleman, compare disfavorably with herself. Melody in her sees merely the peasant wench, and is unable to appreciate (whether in reality or only in his rhetorical strategy towards her) her dual nature which is insisted on in the stage-directions describing Sara (I, 188; *13–4*). Simon seems to symbolize for

[24] *"He controls himself"* (I, 204; *35*); *"controls his anger"* (I, 206; *38*); *"He forces control on himself and sinks back in his chair, his hands gripping the arms."* (I, 207; *40*); *"He controls himself, meeting Sara's contemptuous eyes."* (II, 211; *46*); "MELODY. Nora! For the love of God, stop—(*Suddenly he is able to become the polished gentleman again . . .*)" (II, 219; *57*).

Melody his own true son, the son he always wanted to have, the well-bred gentleman who will confirm his precarious social position (precarious because Melody is, of course, the son of a social upstart). Earlier in the play Melody is much more concerned for the welfare of Simon than for the happiness of his daughter (particularly in his exchange on the marriage question). Simon has replaced Sara in her father's affections because she keeps reminding him of his youthful love affair with Nora and his subsequent marriage to her, a marriage that barred him forever from rising into the Anglo-Irish aristocracy. Sara, even more than Nora, thus constitutes the ever-present reminder of Melody's past, of his illicit affair with Nora, and his even more stupid honorableness in marrying her (a scenario he very aptly evokes when advising Sara to sleep with Simon). Melody's hatred of Sara is a hatred of his past failures, failures that have brought him to his present impasse. Had he married a true-born lady rather than Nora, he would have had a gentleman for his son (Of course it has to be a son, in aristocratic terms one does not think of daughters!). This is why Melody instinctively comes to regard Simon as his true offspring, the son he might have had, had he married a 'thoroughbred' like Simon's mother. In this light Melody's attempt to seduce Deborah loses some of its ridiculous whimsicality and transpires as a (subconscious) impulse to remake the past into what it should have been, securing the stature he has lost on his arrival to the United States. As a consequence, when Melody loses his pride in act IV, Simon is no longer close to his heart, becoming a mere Yankee, and he can concentrate on his daughter's honor rather than Simon's—the stick with which he used to beat Sara (III, 243; *87–8*; IV, 279; *135*).

The next time that Melody loses control of himself, becoming nearly paralyzed with outrage, he has good reason to be beside himself, having just finally comprehended Gadsby's true mission. Sara, this time, is responsible for his humiliation only by proxy and indeed aids him to keep his countenance by appealing to his (and her own) honor not to "dirty" (III, 248; *94*) his hands on Gadsby. In the final act the signs are reversed. It is over Melody's new personality that he is in danger of losing control. When he nearly kills Sara in the reenactment of his past dueling self, he loses control by the standards of his attempt to play the peasant, although, paradoxically, he is of course in complete control of himself within his former gentlemanly code. At this point it is quite clear that Sara engages in a proper duel with her father, that they confront one another as equals. Acts II and IV structure this duel between Melody and his daughter by two important repetitions with a difference. Not only does Sara early on initiate the final duel by her mimed slap (II, 243; *88*), she already goes through stage one of the duel with Melody before he leaves for town. At this point she defies Melody's prohibition to marry Simon, and when he advances upon her, threatening to kill her (at least verbally), her response—as later in act IV—is to face him, substituting an initially 'feminine' response by a Byronic-soldierly one:

> MELODY. You'd sell your pride as my daughter—! *(His face convulsed by fury.)* You filthy peasant slut! You whore! I'll see you dead first—! By the living God, I'd kill you myself! *(He makes a threatening move towards her.)*
> SARA *(shrinks back frightenedly)*. Father! *(Then she stands and faces him defiantly.)* (III, 250; *98*)

This is a precise parallel to the final confrontation. In both cases Sara first shrinks from Melody's advances, then takes up the challenge: "*Sara is terrified, but she stands unflinch-*

ingly" (IV, 275: *130*). The irony of reversals is given a further twist soon after this climax when Sara petitions Melody to again be himself by offering to forsake Simon (IV, 278; *135*). This of course hearkens back to the end of act III (250: *98*), where Sara had refused to give up Simon for the sake of her father's honor. Her plea shows most devastatingly that she has taken over all the (negative) tenets of the gentlemanly role. Simon is put in the position of an object, a stake in the duel between father and daughter. The question is not of love but of politics. Furthermore, Sara is most upset about her father's joining with the "scum" in the bar. She clings to the contempt of the Irish that had gone with her father's gentlemanly role. She is also concerned more with outward appearance than with reality, suggesting that rather than show himself in the bar in his present state her father should have Patch Riley come and play for him, while he drinks on his own. This also suggests a direct parallel to Melody's obsession with appearance and status symbols. The verbal repetition and reversal in this way signals an exchange of positions between Melody and Sara on several levels at once.

A further ironical dimension is introduced at this point when one realizes that in challenging her father's "peasant self" (which is the image that she herself evokes in her father), that is to say in imploring Melody to be again the fake gentleman he was, she is taking the side of the stereotypical Simon, the well-bred gentleman who was her earlier opponent in her father's affections. Even more ironically, the eventual outcome of the conflict, which ends with Sara's defeat (she is unable to break Melody's new role), is the assumption by Sara of Melody's split personality, whereas he seems to have healed his divided self and achieved a (fake) homogeneity as the 'real' peasant. (As I have noted early on, this undivided self is the result of another strategy to repress his past, and particularly his failings, and the repressed unconscious is therefore liable to surface again under sufficient provocation.) On a symbolic level the reversal of positions is thus complete: Melody takes over the stereotype in which he had cast his daughter, and she and Simon—the two projected sides of Melody's psyche—conjoin not merely in marriage but also in Sara's explicit succession to Melody's role. Realistically speaking, Sara's split personality has of course only become reinforced (it was latent from the start), although she has become increasingly more aware of the warring inclinations within her self. Yet Sara's self-awareness does not lead to any immediate resolution of the conflict, as indeed the sequel to the story in *More Stately Mansions* sufficiently illustrates.

These reversals and tensions, as well as the elusive and illusionary position of truth (i.e., a true self) in the play can be documented also on the level of characters' language. Linguistic conduct in *A Touch of The Poet*, for all its use in play-acting (the Major donning genteel language, and Sara contemptuously imitating the brogue) acquires symbolic dimensions. In the literature, the discussion of the language in *A Touch of The Poet* has concentrated on two levels, brogue and non-brogue. However, Melody actually displays at least *three* levels, which characterize his three selves. There is the brogue—which is in a sense an assumed language that is not natural to him and which he has to try hard to maintain (IV, 272–280; *126–130*). Unadulterated brogue is no truer to his nature than the stilted gentlemanly language and pose that he dons for most of acts I to III. In fact his only adumbration of brogue comes upon him in his effusion on hunting (III, 236; *78*)—a point at which he gives free rein to his nostalgia for Ireland and for his former life as a gentleman there. Melody's stilted and fastidious politeness in the earlier parts of the play belongs to the other end of the scale, to his role of the aristocrat.

This is the manner he assumes with Sara and which she recognizes to be his most dangerous mood (III, 237–38; *81*). It is also the manner with which he most cruelly snubs Nora ("I find I am not the least hungry, Nora. I regret your having gone to so much trouble." [I, 209; *43*]). And it is the idiom and the tone Deborah employs regularly. In between these two poles, however, Melody frequently uses what one might call *neutral* and *emotional* idiom. One can argue for several gradations and even qualitative differences in this category. Whenever Sara provokes Melody into losing his temper, he lapses from his refined style, shouting and swearing at her. He never uses brogue at these points—although if that were his 'natural' language, this is the place where one would expect him to use it. The same category also includes the language Melody uses in his anguished exclamations when beset by Sara's arguments lancing the murky areas of his conscience: "Sara! For the love of God, stop—let me go!" (IV, 279; *135*) I would also count Melody's grieving description of the mare's acquiescence into its death (IV, 273; *128*) as one example of the 'neutral' style, the language closest to Melody's 'real' language on stage. The linguistic triad becomes quite explicit in act IV when Melody loses the brogue in moments of anguish, establishing the neutral tone for his 'true' voice so to speak. At that stage, appearance and language still shift between roles. As Ahrends has pointed out in a brilliant comment, Melody is able to control his language before pointing the pistol at Sara, but his face resumes its "former distinction" (IV, 275; *129*).[25]

The linguistic triad is paralleled in *A Touch of The Poet* by similar transformations in outward appearance (dress as well as comportment) and gestures. Gestures, just like language, have the ability to both fake Melody's role and at the same time to symbolically represent it. Melody's 'true' self in this game of quite explicit playacting (a self-reflexive strain of the play that has been acknowledged by numerous critics) remains noticeably elusive, and yet it apparently exists, is *there*, on the stage, because we do have an actor of flesh and blood before us, and we expect that there is another (fictional) being of essential properties *behind* Melody's roles.

All these paradoxes link up with the question of seeming and being in the play. There is a general tendency by the characters (as well as by critics) to see things in terms of truth, or being. The story the play itself tells by means of its imagery and cross-referencing, however, is one that escapes easy binarities and essentialities. *A Touch of The Poet* is all about play acting (often quite explicitly so) and about pretense and self-delusion by means of appearances. However, simulated appearances do not imply pure deceit or falsehood, either. Indeed, outward characteristics frequently suggest some truth and reality for all their apparent duplicity. Thus, descriptions of individual characters in the stage directions quite openly display symbolic over-tones, as in the case of Sara, whose thick ankles and stubby fingers, indicative of her "peasant" nature (I, 188; *14*), are juxtaposed with her lady-like qualities. Melody's gentlemanly bearing has a ring of truth to it, too, and he corroborates the truth of his former status when he appears in his uniform, with which he manages to impress even scornful Sara. Melody's handsomeness and impressive figure when dressed as a major is clearly contrasted with his ruin and defeat, when he reappears in his ripped uniform—like the mare another symbol of his gentility—and has transformed himself into a slouching and leering peasant even in his physical gestures and in the language he uses. The sorry truth about Melody

[25] Ahrends 211.

appears only at odd moments, particularly at the beginning of act II, when Sara surprises him in his dejection and feels pity.

On the other hand, appearances are of course equally masks and intentional disguises. Melody, Deborah and Sara are all variously accused, and accuse each other, of pretense. One recurrent charge is that of donning "airs" (and "graces"). Maloy's contempt for Sara ("airs of a grand lady" [I, 188; *14*]) is immediately counterpointed by Maloy's description of Yankee condescension ("Yankee airs" [I, 189; *15*]). Yet the parallel again implies a truth, since Sara *does* don "airs and graces," for instance, when boasting to her mother of her prospective life as Mrs. Simon Harford.[26] When Melody displays "the airs av a lord" on Harford's doorstep, it is, once again, Jamie Cregan as the trustworthy informant who manages to supply us with a vital aspect of Melody's shifty identity. In challenging Harford to a duel, acting out the role of his past gentlemanly self—a line of conduct that Sara from her commonsensical point of view must needs consider the sign of complete insanity—Melody actually resurrects his past stature (if only briefly) until the brawl with Harford's servants ensues. Significantly, all this happens off-stage, relegating a convincing portrait of Melody's gentlemanly bearing (and his lapse from it) to the wings. For Cregan, who has known Melody in his past incarnation, there is no split in the major until he sloughs off his gentlemanly pretensions. Thus Cregan earns the right to accuse Sara—rather than her father—of being the 'real' fake aristocrat, with her "lady's airs" (IV, 266; *118*, and 268; *121*).

Melody's most convincing resurrection of his past self is of course the mime of act IV, when he fights a duel with Sara. This is the climax of a series of resurrections, changing Melody from the half-alive bar keeper with a hang-over to a semblance of a gentleman (with a noticeable increase in convincingness in the scene with Deborah), to an admirable veteran in his old uniform, until finally—after the demolition of this role in several stages of systematic deconstruction—we are now confronted with a real resurrection. Melody had unsuccessfully tried to awaken the dead major, but only when he has killed him in actual fact, is the ghost able to appear on stage. As we have seen, this mime marks the climax of the father-daughter dispute, and it is the magic point at which Sara receives Melody's, that is to say the dead major's, 'soul' into herself. At the same time this mysterious moment, by its very silence, marks the unrepresentability of the truth, the true Melody so frequently apostrophized by all parties in the play.

I have entitled these deliberations "the illusion of truth" in view of this specific indefinability of the notion of 'truth' in the play. It seems to me that what is at stake is, above all, the 'true' identity of Melody. As we have seen, *A Touch of The Poet* abounds in designations of truth, reality, lies, illusions, dreams, and so on. It also sports a large set of additional concepts that surface again and again, in quite contradictory contexts: honor, pride, love, airs, and pretense, gentlemanliness, or thorough breeding are among these. It will have been observed that the frequent repetition of these words does not inculcate a consistent explication of stage events but, on the contrary, qualifies, undermines and disperses obvious interpretatory reactions. In the last analysis, 'truth' or 'reality' become extremely doubtful, illusionary concepts, and appropriately so in a play that lives on playacting. Masks are all there is, and, whatever realities or truths

[26] Cf. also "*drawing herself up in an unconscious imitation on her father's grand manner*" (II, 223; *62*).

may lie beyond them, can be represented only in absence, in schema, in mime. And this applies to language also. Much of what is *said* on stage pertains to the stock-in-trade of the masks uttering it; cliché is piled on cliché in projections and repressions of the self, the truth, the reality that lies, intangibly, beyond reach in the depths of the human psyche. Melody, in his own looking glass, sees only what he wishes to see, what he wants to represent, and it is no truer than what we, as spectators, see on stage. Performance on stage gives this set-up an additional twist in the sense that whatever Melody perhaps represents by way of a 'true' self, as in the mime, is nothing but artistic creation, once again at double remove from any truth one might posit to exist. Beneath the show of mirrors and clichés and art there are dark and mostly unacknowledged forces which secretly operate the puppet-show of observable reality, here represented on a 'realistic' stage. The question remains perhaps: is this reading, the possibility of this reading, one more illusion we should add to the list?