THE PROTEAN SELF

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*Dramatic Action in
Contemporary Fiction*

Alan Kennedy

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For Shelagh and Angus

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Preface

In the Introduction I try to outline the way in which while engaged in literary criticism I encroached on the borders of Sociology. I have also found myself at the border with Philosophy and no doubt the awkwardness of my forays into alien territory will not go undetected by professional border-guards. I would like to be able to take some comfort in the belief that (according to Wm Righter in *Logic and Criticism*, 1963) the value of criticism is not in the conclusions it reaches but in the interest it arouses on the way towards a conclusion. Despite the fact that criticism is not like normal argument, and the additional fact that Art is not Philosophy, the critic cannot escape being a thinker and he must be prepared to accept the consequences of his own thought and its shortcomings. It must therefore be admitted that a concept of the nature of the Self emerges from the following study, and while it cannot be called a philosophical disquisition I naturally hope that this book will serve to reveal what the Self is like in some modern literature. Such information should be of interest to those whose task it is to construct systems of thought; and it could also be of some interest to those common readers of whom I am one, who like to think that on occasion creative literature has a 'philosophy' in the old-fashioned sense.

The concept of the Self I have called the 'protean self' and the reader, if he is the sort who reads introductions first will find some elucidation there. Others who read introductions as they are usually written, after the main text, but would like a short explication of the title will find the phrase from Coleridge that gives rise to it on p. 8.

I am greatly indebted to Alex Rodger of the University of Edinburgh, who not only provided a stimulus in the form of intelligent, wide-ranging conversation, but also carefully read

and commented on this work in all its stages. I benefited also from a few brief conversations I was able to have with Sam Goldberg during his stay in Edinburgh. Frank Kermode was kind enough to read a draft of the chapter on Muriel Spark and make some encouraging comments. The financial support of the Canada Council gave me the time.

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A. K.

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Only the counted poem, to an exact measure:
to imitate, not to copy nature, not
to copy nature
NOT, prostrate, to copy nature
but a dance! to dance
two and two with him –

'The Desert Music', William Carlos Williams

Our marriage is a drama, but no stage-play where
what is not spoken is not thought: in our theatre
all that I cannot syllable You will pronounce
in acts whose *raison d'être* escapes me. Why secrete
fluid when I dole, or stretch your lips when I joy?
'Talking to Myself', W. H. Auden