THE VAJRADHATU SUN

needs to produce secondary literature (writing about other writing) on the "expanding economy" principle (more! more!)—and which, as a corollary, tends to describe and classify recent and even just-emerging works and their authors by school and/or theory: regionalist, postmodern, meta-fictional, magical realist, minimalist, minority, feminist, "language-oriented," etc. What doesn't fit easily into one of these temporal pigeonholes is mostly ignored by both academe and the (presently rather ragged yet brazenly eloquent) "establishments" of literary journalism.

On the other hand, what "common readers" may still be assumed to exist out there in the literate world, those who "would be reading narrative fiction and nourishing themselves on the oldest of all safe and enduring pleasures: news and fun and consolation"—as Reynolds Price puts it in his back cover blurb for My Own Alphabet—have found their way to the novels of Douglas Woolf, the short stories of Dawson, and Hawkins's previous books. They have another treat coming here.

While Alphabet would seem to indicate some degree of linearity ("A to Z? OK"), it soon becomes obvious that this is very much the author's "own" arrangement of the world—a collage, in fact, of three or four "modern classic" style short stories, just plain remembered and retold stories, soleloquies, dialogues, "characters," quotes, memories, reflections.

Among the personages of the pageant are a lady of such tremendous conversational impact that she is practically bulletproof ("Bumper Stickers"); the actual writer of Lon Chaney's werewolf movies—whose motivation and methodology are fully explained here, for the first time ("Madame Ouspenskaya and the Wolfman"); "Mrs. Florence Foster Jenkins," the world's worst coloratura singer; and several alter egos of both the writer and her ex-husband/fellow writer, including "Maggie Magee," who has a wiseguy short story accepted and published in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine (we are given the story with in the story), and Patrick Dougherty, the famous poet who emerges bloody but unbowed from two harrowing encounters south of the border, one with a xenophobic and potentially deadly man of the people, the other with a deadly dull servant of the great American academic machine who is spending his sabbatical working on an epic poem that "does a lot with enjambment" ("Enroute").

The "memoirs" sections of My Own Alphabet include "Journal...Mattatian," whose prose sometimes achieves an almost hallucinatory precision:

We look directly out onto a flat horizon of the Pacific and sometimes see ships crossing there as particularly silhouetted as if they are cardboard cutouts. The ocean lies so the horizon is at eye level. The ships have only passed from right to left. They cross our view very like the objects that cross to be shot at in shooting galleries...

The island to the right is slightly larger, Humphreys, more of a piece; the island to the left has a higher center but more slopes and, on its right side, toward us, has a long grass meadow.

After this length of time, looking at them, I feel sensitive to their look as if it were their name.

Here, as at the end of this piece, and in discursive passages throughout the book, a thoughtful artist's eye informs the writing:

The bright light behind us, from the hotel, cast our shadows toward the water. We walked on our shadows. They grew longer with every step. The dress I wore showed the bands of lace, where the light shone through, as if a shadow could be decorated.

Chekhov's shade must have been hovering near Bobbie Louis Hawkins's elbow while she wrote "Burnt Park," a short story of six pages that covers all the bases: exile, marriage, dreams of ambition, madness, and death, without ever lapsing into (or ever approaching) the melodramatic. Quite by itself, it is an old-time masterpiece.

Under "W," Hawkins quotes Virginia Woolf: "The test of a book (to a writer) is if it makes a space in which, quite naturally, you can say what you want to say." In My Own Alphabet, she has made such a space for her saying, and seeing, and thinking, and it invites us into its collaged garden of earthly despairs and delights.

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