

THE VAJRADHATU SUN

One Little Human Universe

BY ANSELM HOLLO

MY OWN ALPHABET:

Stories, Essays & Memoirs

By Bobbie Louise Hawkins

(Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1989)
151 pages, \$9.95 paper

Bobbie Louise Hawkins's new book *My Own Alphabet* encompasses, in addition to the "stories, essays and memoirs" listed in the subtitle, a number of quotes from various sources, among them Aristotle, Darwin, Kafka, Remy de Gourmont, and Ed Zern—don't tell me you've never heard of Ed Zern. To these, I would like to add one which seems to me to cast a light on the nature of this book. It comes from an essay by E.M. Forster in which he describes a friend, the Alexandrian poet Constantine P. Cavafy, as

Standing... at a slight angle to the universe, a stance shared by his sentence—an immense complicated yet shapely sentence, full of parentheses that never get mixed and of reservations that really do reserve; a sentence that moves with logic to its foreseen end, yet to an end that is always more vivid and thrilling than one foresaw... And despite its intellectual richness and human outlook, despite the matured charity of its judgements, one feels that it too stands at a slight angle to the universe: it is the sentence of a poet.

Hawkins, like Cavafy, is keenly aware of the complicated vastness of even just one little human universe, and her sentences, too, deal with such things as "the tricky behavior of the Emperor Alexius Comnenus in 1906, or with olives, their possibilities and price, or with the fortunes of friends, or with George Eliot"—and similarly, they do not meet that universe head-on, but at that "slight angle."

Hawkins's writing participates in a tradition of American modernism that includes contemporaries like Fielding Dawson, Douglas Woolf, Edward Dorn, and others sometimes grouped under the "Black Mountain" rubric. In terms of critical or "canonical" recognition, this is a lineage that has suffered to some extent from our relentless academic machine which

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 cliquish) "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, soloquies, 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...Mazatlan," 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 lifts 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, lumpier, 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 Louise 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 even 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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