Kenneth O. Hanson (1922-2003)

Poet Kenneth Ostlin Hanson lived in the Pacific Northwest for most of his life. In the nearly forty years he spent in Portland, Hanson wrote numerous collections and won many awards for his work, including the Theodore Roethke Award for Northwest poets (1964). Notably, Hanson did not write about the Northwest, as many of his regional contemporaries did. As one critic wrote: "No other Northwest poet of comparable achievement has written as much as Kenneth O. Hanson about places other than the Northwest."

Born in Shelley, Idaho, in 1922, Hanson earned a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Idaho in 1942 and served in the U.S. Army during World War II, gaining the rank of staff sergeant. He began teaching at the University of Washington in 1946 while doing graduate work in Chinese and comparative literature and accepted a position to teach literature and humanities at Reed College in 1954, where he taught until 1986.

In 1966, for *The Distance Anywhere*, Hanson received the Lamont Award from the Academy of American Poets "for the discovery and encouragement of a new poetic genius." He would later receive the Theodore Roethke Award, a Fulbright grant, a Rockefeller fellowship, and two National Endowment for the Arts Grants in Poetry.

Hanson's other collections include *Saronikos and Other Poems* (1970), *The Uncorrected World* (1973), *Lighting the Night Sky* (1983), and *A Bowl of Cherries and Other Poems* (1995). He translated *Growing Old Alive: Poems by Han Yü* (1978), and his work was included in many anthologies and magazine publications. One collection, *Making the Scene: Selected Poems*, was published posthumously in 2004.

Hanson first visited Greece in 1964, and that country became his primary poetic exploration. "In his poems on Greece," wrote a *New York Times* reviewer in 1967, "he is aware of the classical past, but he doesn't swoon over it." For Hanson, history was "something lived by people," and he believed that daily occurrences connect peoples and cultures across time and space. In 1993, he relocated to Athens, Greece. He wrote to a friend: "In general I like it here, the sun, the sea, and the fact that I only half understand what goes on. It frees the imagination."

Hanson also translated classical Chinese poetry. In *Growing Old Alive: Poems by Han Yu* and *The Distance Anywhere*, which includes original and translated work, he emphasizes human commonalities and locates similarities between Chinese poets and an outside observer in Greece, both of whom struggle to find purpose and position.

His focus on the ordinary and his outsider perspective brought Hanson both praise and criticism. A 1974 *New York Times* review of *The Uncorrected World* called him a "wry observer," but one who left "raw facts...untouched by deep understanding of art." As Hanson once said, "Theories about the apple are less interesting than the apple." He lived in Greece until his death in 2003.

Written by Thomas Justman

Further Reading:

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Skelton, Robin. *Five Poets of the Pacific Northwest.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964.

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