

AN OREGON POET AT HOME IN GREECE

By Eleanor Berry

Kenneth O. Hanson, one of Oregon's most distinguished recent poets, taught at Reed College from 1954 until his retirement in 1986. Born in Idaho, he had come to the Pacific Northwest for graduate study in comparative literature and the Chinese language at the University of Washington. But the place where he was most at home was Greece, a country he first visited in 1963 and where he subsequently spent summers and, after his retirement, went to live. He remained there until his death in 2003.

For Hanson, living in Greece proved highly conducive to poetry. Remarkably, despite having learned Chinese and published translations of Chinese as well as French poetry, he never learned Greek. This may have helped him to stay acutely sensitive to the sounds and rhythms of the speech around him and to preserve the stance of an outside observer. Thus in one poem, he exclaims, "Exquisite language! / for shouting over water/ how can you whisper a secret in it / before you know it, the word is out / the vowels definite as shadows / the consonants open the doors / and the cry from the heart."

While Hanson adopted Greece as his country, his representation of it in his poetry is hardly uncritical. Having been there during a military coup and a period of military rule, he painted modern Greece in a harsh light. Nonetheless, he evidently relished the sense of a deep past of political and cultural greatness and the setting of rocky land under a blue sky with a brilliant sun.

The speaker in Hanson's poems, in most cases clearly the poet himself, comes across as person with decided and somewhat quirky tastes. Thus in "The Swallows of Mytilene," he addresses the swallows, "Your song is not beautiful / ... "What I like is your style. / Not one of

those tiresome birds / that soar, you cut up the air / in a series of twitches / controlled, nervous
...” This description of the swallows’ flight could serve equally well to describe the movement
of Hanson’s typically short, sparsely punctuated lines.

This agile verse is Hanson’s vehicle for conveying his sharp observations of life in the
country he adopted and the skeptical, ironic attitude he maintained toward it—as in these lines
about Askra, birthplace of the ancient Greek poet Hesiod, which he had visited on a car trip:

“The vast / light breaks the ages down / damned cold in winter damned / hot in summer. How /
could he love this land / outpost of nowhere / murderous as myth.”