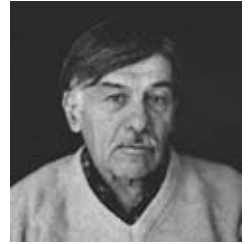




## Norse, Harold (1916-2009)

by Greg Baysans

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A portrait of Harold Norse by Stathis Orphanos. Courtesy Stathis Orphanos. Copyright © Stathis Orphanos. All Rights Reserved.

Often categorized as a Beat writer, poet and memoirist Harold Norse created a body of work that uses everyday language and images to explore and celebrate both the commonplace and the exotic. His poetry is lyrical and confessional, expressing homoerotic attractions and encounters not as novelty but as lived experience.

Norse was born July 6, 1916, in Brooklyn, New York, to an unwed immigrant Russian Jewish mother, and created his surname from an anagram of her name in Russian. In his autobiography, *Memoirs of a Bastard Angel* (1989), Norse surmised that his father was a German-American soldier. He was raised by his mother amid her ever-converting family (and their anti-Semitic spouses) and, for a while, an abusive stepfather.

Norse was drawn to literature in high school. In 1934 he began attending Brooklyn College, where he was the first freshman to win the annual poetry contest in the school's literary publication.

In his senior year at Brooklyn College, Norse met a freshman, Chester Kallman. They became lovers despite the sexually precocious Kallman's promiscuity.

In 1939 the two learned of an upcoming visit by W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, who were to present their first American reading in New York. Having heard that Auden and Isherwood were also homosexual, Norse and Kallman decided to attend the reading, where they sat in the front row and winked at the visiting literary celebrities. Within months, Auden had pursued and attained Kallman, who would be Auden's companion for the rest of the poet's life. Norse's life of brushes with the great, near-great, and about-to-be-great was underway.

In 1951 Norse's talent was recognized by the well-known but not yet influential poet William Carlos Williams, who invited Norse to read at a program at the Museum of Modern Art in early 1952. Williams singled out Norse for being able to "use the direct image on its own," and he became an important mentor to him. Among the ways in which Williams influenced Norse was in the use of common language and conversational tone, and in the abandonment of traditional meter in favor of composing in the "metrical foot."

Norse's "The Railroad Yard," a poem in ten stanzas, first attracted the attention of Williams. In it Norse shows that he is not afraid of a taboo subject when, in stanza five, the poem's narrator receives candy and then a kiss from "An old man with a sack."

Norse's first book of poetry, *The Undersea Mountain*, was published in 1953, and was reviewed in such places as the *New York Times* and *Poetry* magazine. But, as Norse writes in his memoirs, "Instead of starting on the second book I decided to leave America." With a small financial windfall and the help of his mother, he headed to Europe with enough funds to last three months and have enough for a return ticket. He was to live abroad until 1969.

## Roman Years

Norse first settled in Italy, where he lived from 1954 until 1959. Quickly learning the native language, Norse became acquainted with the work of the nineteenth-century Italian poet, Giuseppe Gioachino Belli. Sensing a similarity between Belli's Roman slang and the "Brooklynese" Norse had known growing up, Norse "for the sheer joy of it"-- took up the project of translating some of Belli's sonnets (which number over 2000), a task that James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence had attempted only to abandon in failure.

In 1956 twenty-six of Norse's translations of Belli's sonnets appeared in the April issue of the *Hudson Review*. Following an enthusiastic response from readers, arrangements were made for the publication of a book that would contain more of Norse's seventy to eighty translations. However, because the printer considered the book obscene and "anti-papal," publication was delayed until 1960, when the contract between the publisher and the printer lapsed.

In addition to using various dictionaries, when translating Belli Norse also used the services of several street hustlers he knew. Asked how he accomplished the translations, Norse would reply, "With a dictionary in one hand and a Roman in the other."

A 1957 poem, "Victor Emmanuel Monument (Rome)," published in the *Saturday Review*, nearly got Norse deported from Italy when the Italian government deemed it political fodder for the Communists. The poem's last line describes underpaid soldiers or guards at night "picking up extra cash from man and boy." Because the poem had put the editor in a political controversy, Norse was never again published in the *Saturday Review*.

In 1957 Williams praised Norse's long poem "Florence," which appeared in *Poetry*. "I have never seen anything like it. It is really a masterpiece," Williams wrote, and added, "But as in any other masterpiece it incurs responsibilities. You can't repeat it. Are you going to change your style to conform to it?" Williams was struck by a section of the poem in which Norse expresses his repugnance at seeing some Renaissance art depicting Classical heroes, "realizing that such lust and madness for power was based on an indomitable will to crush, to destroy--trampling on women."

Norse regarded his 1958 work, "Classic Frieze in a Garage," as a "stylistic breakthrough." In the poem, the past and present coexist, and a new-found meditative stillness is introduced to Norse's poetry. In a letter, Norse related the genesis of the poem, "I actually saw, on a street in Naples, the incredible juxtaposition--in an old garage where mechanics were welding & greasing & blow-torcing cars--two huge classic friezes, hardly the worse for wear, stood proudly and majestically over the Fiats, the mechanics & the gasoline!"

The poem concludes:

but I saw Hermes in the rainbow  
of the dark oil on the floor  
reflected there  
& the wild hair of the sybil  
as her words bubbled  
mad & drowned  
beneath the motor's roar[.]

## Among the Beats

In 1957 Williams wrote to Norse that a "gang now is . . . headed for Italy," a group of "young (not so young) poets." Referring to Allen Ginsberg, Jack Keruoac, and Gregory Corso by name, Williams also mentioned

that another member of the group was living in a Zen Buddhist monastery in Japan, alluding to Gary Snyder. Norse had recently begun practicing Buddhist meditation, which had been introduced to him by an American acquaintance he ran into in Rome. On learning that this new group of writers was attracted to Eastern philosophy and spirituality, Norse was very interested indeed. As he recalled, "The effect on me was electric."

Although associated with the Beat movement, Norse was not part of the original circle that became known as the Beats, and he is sometimes considered peripheral to the movement. But he certainly shared with the Beats nonconformist attitudes and openness to a variety of experience. He also shared their interest in colloquial expression, spontaneous writing, and literary experimentation.

The original Beat writers had an initial flurry of social activity in San Francisco and New York in the late 1940s and first became productive in the 1950s. By the time they became well known in 1957, the year of the obscenity trial of Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* and the publication of Kerouac's *On the Road*, those writers were no longer in America, but were frequenting a "flea-bag" hotel in Paris, described in a *Life* magazine article at the time and known since as the "Beat Hotel."

It is there--in 1960--that Norse caught up with the Beats by moving into the hotel at the invitation of William S. Burroughs. Already writing in a style consistent with the Beats, Norse did not have to conform his writing to any particular Beat attitude.

Prior to moving into the Beat Hotel, Norse spent a short residence in an apartment in Paris said to have been used by Arthur Rimbaud. There Norse experimented with "cut-ups" (allowing chance to become part of the creative process by cutting up prose and reassembling the random paragraphs into chapters). When he moved into the Beat Hotel many of the writers there, especially Gregory Corso, Burroughs, and Brion Gysin, were also utilizing cut-ups. A chapter of Norse's prose manuscript called "Sniffing Keyholes," which he describes as "a sex/dope scene between a muscular black youth called Melo and a blond Russian princess called Z.Z.," made even the often gloomy Burroughs laugh.

What remains of Norse's completed manuscript (part of it disappeared from the Beat Hotel while he was on a brief trip), including "Sniffing Keyholes," was first published, translated into German, in 1975 as *Beat Hotel*. The first American edition (in the original English) was not released until 1983. Scatological and deeply influenced by Burroughs, *Beat Hotel* is an important artifact from the days when the Beats were a focus of worldwide literary attention. The 1983 publication includes three postscripts by Norse important in their own right, one describing the last days of the Beat Hotel, another detailing the methodology of the cut-ups.

In 1961 Norse also gained a brief reputation as a visual artist when an exhibit of his "random" drawings premiered in Paris. Norse threw capsules of paint onto paper, which he would then rinse in the hotel's bidet and let dry. The exhibit sold out and brought Norse patronage from the elite of the Paris art world.

"Paris journal, September 1961," a section of a long poem, "From the 6th Arrondissement," which was written in the Beat Hotel, is representative of much of Norse's poetry. It is sexual without being sensational, vivid yet focused on an ordinary event. The poet's attention to detail, mood, and language elevates a journal entry to poetry:

Masturbate wildly. 3 a.m. A knock.  
Throw open the door, naked.  
Arab I used to know. No place  
to stay, Crash here? OK. Shows  
me his boat ticket. "I return

to Tunis in a week." Removes shoes & socks, revealing huge dirty feet, swollen from tramping. Asks for scissors, slowly cuts all his fingernails, then toenails. Removes gray houndstooth suit. Climbs into bed, mutters, "Je suis très fatigué." Loud snores. Next morning, without a word, he dresses & laying a cold hand on my arm leaves. Masturbate wildly.

Norse began receiving serious critical attention in the mid-1960s. A 1966 issue of the avant-garde literary journal *Ole* was devoted to him. It included tributes, letters, and critical notices. Throughout the 1960s, Norse's work appeared in the *Evergreen Review*, a groundbreaking American literary journal that published the Beats alongside internationally acclaimed experimental writers such as Samuel Beckett, Günter Grass, and Octavio Paz.

### San Francisco Years

In 1969 Norse returned to America. He eventually settled in San Francisco, becoming part of the San Francisco literary scene. Reflecting the Gay Liberation movement erupting around him, his poetry of the 1970s contained unapologetically gay and political content. His 1972 poem, "I'm Not a Man," for example, concludes with the quiet but powerful feminist statement, "I am not a man. I don't want to destroy you."

Two significant books of poetry by Norse appeared in the 1970s. The first, *Hotel Nirvana: Selected Poems, 1953-73* (1974; Number 32 in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights pocket poets series), cemented Norse's association with the Beats. The other, *Carnivorous Saint, Gay Poems 1941-1976*, published by Gay Sunshine Press in 1977, solidified his reputation as a gay poet.

In his introduction to the anthology *Orgasms of Light* (1977), Winston Leyland describes *Carnivorous Saint* as "among the five most important books of poetry to be published . . . in the U.S. within the past decade." Notable poems from *Carnivorous Saint* include the frank "To a Hustler," "This Beautiful Young Man," and "Gas Station," the last a masterly and evocative scene of sexual tension between strangers.

Norse's erotic poems have been included in such anthologies of gay poetry as Ian Young's *The Male Muse* (1973), Winston Leyland's *Orgasms of Light* (1977), Stephen Coote's *The Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse* (1983), Young's *Son of The Male Muse* (1983), and David Laurents's *The Badboy Book of Erotic Poetry* (1995).

Norse began work on his memoirs in the early 1980s, originally casting them in the form of a stage play entitled *Memoirs of a Bastard Angel*, about the Auden-Kallman-Norse triangle, as well as in episodic vignettes first printed in the *City of San Francisco* magazine concerning his encounters with such famous people as Ginsberg, Tennessee Williams, and Marlon Brando.

In 1989 *Memoirs of a Bastard Angel* was published not as a play, but as what the subtitle describes as "A Fifty-Year Literary and Erotic Odyssey." In his memoirs, Norse attempted to expose the "false myths and legends" that have been "perpetuated by ardent admirers of famous artists, in the belief that the fictitious creation and the person are one and the same." He added, "The famous men and women I knew were nothing like the public imagined them."

In addition to Auden, Ginsberg, Tennessee Williams, and Brando, Norse describes in his book such figures as James Baldwin, Anais Nin, John Cage, Ned Rorem, Robert de Niro, Roman Polanski, Ezra Pound, Sir Harold Acton, Dame Edith Sitwell, Paul and Jane Bowles, Dylan and Caitlin Thomas, Paul Goodman, Pier Paolo

Pasolini, James Jones, the Duke of Windsor (King Edward VIII), Marc Chagall, Tristan Tzara, Gore Vidal, Arnold Schwarzenegger, e. e. cummings, Kenneth Patchen, and numerous others.

In 1990 Norse issued his correspondence with William Carlos Williams in a volume entitled *The American Idiom: A Correspondence: William Carlos Williams & Harold Norse 1951-61*. His letters to and from Charles Bukowski appeared under the title *Fly Like a Bat Out of Hell* in 2002.

## Conclusion

Twice recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, Norse received a lifetime achievement award from the National Poetry Association in 1991.

In 2003 Norse published *In the Hub of the Fiery Force, Collected Poems 1934-2003*, which includes more than 100 previously unpublished works. This volume thus offers an opportunity to view his work as a whole. So seen, it displays a remarkable consistency, particularly in the use of colloquial language and everyday images to celebrate both the commonplace and the exotic. Incorporating Eastern philosophy to enrich a Western homosexual identity, Norse's art expresses a unique vision.

In 1996 Norse suffered a heart attack and underwent quadruple bypass surgery. He continued to live and write in San Francisco until his death on June 9, 2009.

Among the projects he worked on in his last years is a manuscript entitled *Homo*, which traces the history of homophobia in prose and poetry, from the days of early Christianity to the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard.

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### **About the Author**

**Greg Baysans** co-founded *The James White Review* in Minneapolis in 1983, and was contributing editor until 1991. His work has also appeared in *The Evergreen Chronicles* and *Poets Without Borders*. A native of North Dakota, he lives in Portland, Oregon.