Guide to the Harold Norse Papers

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The Bancroft Library

2019
The Bancroft Library
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URL: http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/libraries/bancroft-library
Language of Material: English
Contributing Institution: The Bancroft Library
Title: Harold Norse papers
Identifier/Call Number: BANC MSS 2010/172
Physical Description: 49 linear feet (36 cartons, 2 boxes, 5 oversize boxes, 1 portfolio, and 5 oversize folders)
Date (inclusive): 1921-2009
Date (bulk): bulk 1960-2006
Abstract: The Harold Norse papers, [1921]-2009; undated [bulk 1960s-2006] consist of correspondence, writings, professional papers, legal papers, personal papers and artworks that chart Norse’s literary trajectory from his time in college to his death.
Language of Material: English, French, Italian.
Many of the Bancroft Library collections are stored offsite and advance notice may be required for use. For current information on the location of these materials, please consult the library’s online catalog.
Conditions Governing Access
Collection is open for research, with the following exceptions: Box 1 sealed until January 2049. Portfolio 1 restricted [curatorial approval required].
Accruals
No accruals are expected.
Immediate Source of Acquisition
The Harold Norse papers were given to The Bancroft Library by University of California, Berkeley Foundation on March 1, 2014.
Arrangement
This collection is arranged to the folder level.
Biographical / Historical
Harold Norse (his surname a clever rearrangement of birth name Rosen) was born in Brooklyn, NY in 1916, the illegitimate son of Fanny Albaum, an unwed Lithuanian Jewish immigrant. In 1934 he began attending Brooklyn College. Norse edited the campus literary magazine Brooklyn College Observer and received his B.A there in 1938. That same year, Norse met Chester Kallman. The following year, they were to both meet W.H. Auden at a reading event featuring Auden and Christopher Isherwood. Auden and Kallman quickly became lovers (eventually lifelong companions) and Norse, for a brief time, Auden’s secretary. It was to be the beginning of Norse’s uncanny ability of meeting and befriending literary and artistic greats.
Norse went on to meet William Carlos Williams in 1951 the same year he received his master’s degree in literature from New York University. Williams soon became a mentor and strong supporter of Norse’s poetry praising his verse for dispensing with traditional poetic forms and embracing a more direct, conversational language. His first book of poems, The Undersea Mountain, was published in 1953.
In 1954, Norse traveled to Europe leading an ex-patriot life there until 1968. During these 14 years, Norse resided in Italy, France, Greece and Tangier. Norse’s quick command of Italian during his stay in Italy from 1954-1959 afforded him the opportunity to translate and then publish the earthy sonnets of the nineteenth-century Italian poet, Giuseppe Gioachino Belli. The Belli translations were instantly considered striking, confident and definitive. One of Norse’s most famous poems, Classic Frieze in a Garage was written during this period.
Norse was to explore the experimental literary technique of the cut-up along with William S. Burroughs, while both were living in a small, run-down hotel in the Latin Quarter of Paris in 1960. The experience of living and writing at the hotel, whose other residents at the time included Allen Ginsburg and Gregory Corso, was the groundwork of Norse’s fictional novella Beat Hotel first published in German translation in 1975.
In 1961, Norse had a brief dalliance as a visual artist producing a well-received body of ink on paper paintings collectively titled Cosmographs. A few of these works were subsequently featured in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s comprehensive exhibition Beat Culture and the New America, 1950-1965 in 1995.
Returning to America in 1968, Norse first arrived in Venice, California, nearby to the then nearly unknown poet Charles Bukowski. Norse was one of the first to champion Bukowski’s work by introducing him to the broader public in the thirteenth of the series Penguin Modern Poets in 1969. Norse’s manuscript Fly like a Bat out of Hell which collected over a decade’s worth of correspondence between him and Bukowski was scheduled to be published by Thunder’s Mouth Press in 2002, but was never printed.
Leaving Los Angeles, Norse then moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1972, briefly living in a home he bought in Monte Rio, a small town along the Russian River, before permanently settling in an apartment in the Mission District of San Francisco for the remainder of his life. The following decades until Norse’s death were equally productive as the years in Europe, despite his health problems which ranged from chronic insomnia to open heart surgery. In 1974 City Lights published Hotel Nirvana: Selected Poems, 1953-1973 and from 1975-1977 Norse himself published the short-lived literary journal, Bastard Angel.

With the ascendance of the gay liberation movement in the early 1970s, and San Francisco being an epicenter for that movement, Norse, who had been living openly as a gay man for years, solidified his reputation as a gay poet by publishing Carnivorous Saint: Gay Poems 1941-1976 with Gay Sunshine Press in 1977. The theme of gay love and desire was revisited in Harold Norse: The Love Poems, 1940-1985 published in 1986.

In 1985 Norse began work on recounting the vivid episodes of his life (from birth though the Europe years and subsequent arrival in San Francisco) which was published in 1989 as Memoirs of a Bastard Angel, subtitled “A Fifty-Year Literary and Erotic Odyssey.” His celebrated autobiography recounted with unflinching and gossipy detail encounters romantic, collegial, and adversarial with such literary and artistic luminaries as Auden, Ginsberg, Tennessee Williams, James Baldwin, Julian Beck, Anaïs Nin, Ned Rorem, Ezra Pound, Paul and Jane Bowles, Dylan Thomas, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Marc Chagall, Tristan Tzara, Gore Vidal, e. e. cummings, and copious others.

Beginning in 1989 and through 1992, Norse, along with friend and business partner Gregory Maloney, ran the publishing venture Bright Tyger Press. Bright Tyger only published two works: The American Idiom, a decade of collected correspondence between William Carlos Williams and Norse and Boyd McDonald’s Skin the eighth in the long-running x-rated gay zine series 5TH or Straight to Hell.

His final published collection of poems, In the Hub of the Fiery Force, Collected Poems 1934-2003, appeared in 2003 and included more than 100 previously unpublished works. As Norse wrote in his preface, “The fiery force is nothing more than the life force as we know it. It is the flame of desire and love, of sex and beauty, of pleasure and joy as we consume and are consumed, as we burn with pleasure and burn out in time.”

Despite Norse being intimate friends with Beat poets and authors throughout his life and having received serious critical attention in the mid-1960s (the 1966 issue of the avant-garde literary journal Ole prominently featured him), he was often perceived as peripheral to the Beat scene. The fame surrounding poets such as Ginsburg and Burroughs was to elude Norse, but other poets such as Neeli Cherkovski have expressed their admiration for Norse’s accomplishments, “Harold was one of the pre-eminent rebel poets of our time. He was someone who smashed conventions, like Ginsberg, and broke through to what he called a new rhythm, writing the way he talked, using the voices of the street. He also gave voice to homosexuality early on.”

Preferred Citation
[Identification of item], Harold Norse papers, BANC MSS 2010/172, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Processing Information
Processed by Dean Smith in 2017-2019.

City Lights Books Records, 1953-1970, BANC MSS 72/107 c
Neeli Cherkovski papers, 1965-2011, BANC MSS 2013/183
Josephine Miles Papers, BANC MSS 86/107 c
San Francisco State College Poetry Center records, 1953-1961, BANC MSS 78/161 c
Lawrence Ferlinghetti papers, 1919-2003, BANC MSS 90/30 c
Louis Cuneo Papers, 1973-2003, BANC MSS 88/183 c
Cafe Society photographs [graphic]: Beat poets and North Beach, San Francisco, BANC PIC 2003.083
Christopher Felver portraits of poets, authors, and artists [graphic], BANC PIC 2001.068
Howard Hart photograph collection [graphic], BANC PIC 2010.035

Scope and Contents
The Harold Norse papers, 1934-2009; undated [bulk 1960s-2006] consist of correspondence, writings, professional papers, legal papers, personal papers and artworks that chart Norse’s literary trajectory from his time in college to his death. Correspondence is comprised primarily of two rich and voluminous subseries: Outgoing and General which largely span Norse’s career from the 1970s to 2008 and features his many colleagues and publishing associates (a few correspondents folders are primarily or exclusively photocopies reproduced from Norse’s archive at the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington); however, the subseries Family correspondence is slight. Many of the folders in the subseries General contain
both incoming and outgoing letters where appropriate. This subseries is also noted for Norse’s predilection for printing out his emails. Correspondence concludes with the subseries Others consisting of a tiny clutch of letters written by other individuals to others.

Writings begin with the large subseries Journals/Notebooks, some being photocopies reproduced from Norse’s archive at the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington. Included in this subseries are a small batch of calendars which serve as de facto journals in that they record meetings with individuals and events. The following subseries Prose spans a variety of subjects and formats: from articles and essays, introductions, letters to editors, lectures, obituaries, reviews, playscripts, cut-up texts, and both book length and short story fiction and non-fiction works.

The subseries Poetry represents the least arranged series in this collection. Norse’s papers upon arrival at the Bancroft Library were in a state of utter disarray. An initial attempt was made to organize the poems as represented in the sub-subseries Poems-Gathered, but this proved to be a nearly impossible task. As a result, poems are merely foldered very roughly by date and then arranged very roughly by date; a minimal attempt to sort and gather poems by title within these folders was made when feasible. The sub-subseries Poems-Gathered concludes with broadsides, poems printed in journals and magazines, and a list of poems. The few poems that were initially separated from the general disarray and then foldered according to title are represented in the sub-subseries Individual Poems.

The subseries Poetry continues with the sub-subseries Poems Received by Morrison & Foerster which are bound photocopies of Norse’s poems that were gathered by the law firm in an effort to help manage his estate. The sub-subseries Collected Poems is well organized alphabetically by title of collection. The sub-subseries Collected Poems by Geographical Region represent Norse’s own gathering of poems written in various locales. The sub-subseries Poems in Translation are the various poems of Norse’s translated and concludes with poems by others that Norse himself translated. Writings concludes with subseries Writings by Others.

The series Publicity gathers together various papers representing the promotional side of Norse’s career, from profile articles, interviews, and reviews to promotional materials generated by Norse himself or the P.R. firms he hired. This series concludes with poetry reading flyers and miscellaneous publicity materials.

Professional Papers concern primarily the publishing aspects of Norse’s career and contain various sub-subseries detailing biographical and bibliographical papers, materials from awards and conferences, contracts, permissions and copyrights pertaining to individual works, Norse’s own publishing ventures, and teaching materials for courses Norse taught at various institutions.

Legal Papers primarily represent the defamation suit Norse waged, unsuccessfully, against biographer Ted Morgan and Morgan’s publisher Henry Holt & Co. The series also contains various other lawsuits Norse initiated, correspondence with his longtime lawyer Jerome N. Field Inc., a will, and miscellany.

Personal Papers are divided into three subseries: General, Notes, and News Clippings. General includes address books, passports & IDs, college materials (e.g.: a yearbook, college literary journal and diplomas), astrological charts, a small clutch of papers relating to Norse’s mother and his personal real estate, a large amount of personal classified ads (both his own advertisements and the responses he both sent and received to others ads), and materials regarding Norse’s brief engagement with the organization NAMBLA (North American Man Boy Love Association). Personal classified ad letters sent to Norse and correspondence sent to NAMBLA while Norse was part of the organization have been restricted and sealed until 2049 due to privacy concerns. The subseries General concludes with various subject files and miscellany. The subseries Notes gathers together the voluminous loose sheets of paper that Norse had written to himself on various subjects and that were scattered throughout the collection. News Clippings represent the substantial amount of news articles (and few magazine articles) Norse had clipped from newspapers and then annotated (often heavily) with commentary. The subject matter of these news clippings is highly varied.

Artworks is divided into two subseries: By Norse and By Others. By Norse includes his noted Cosmographs, including documentation about them, sketchbooks, a large oversized collage titled, How I Love a People Who Don’t Live for the Love of Money and various loose drawings/sketches. By Others are artworks, mostly unidentified, but also include a small painting on paper by William S. Burroughs, prints by Marie Wilson, an oversize woodblock print by Brion Gysin, exhibition announcements, and a portrait sketch of Norse as a child.

Conditions Governing Use

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