Harold Norse, Beat poet had explored gay identity

By William Grimes
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NEW YORK — Harold Norse, a poet who broke new ground beginning in the 1950s by exploring gay identity and sexuality in a distinctly American idiom relying on plain language and direct imagery, died Monday in San Francisco. He was 92.

The death was confirmed by Todd Swindell, a friend.

Although Mr. Norse is often classified with the Beats, he had already developed his themes and his style when, in the early 1960s, he fell in with Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Gregory Corso, just a few of the many writers with whom he formed romantic or professional relationships. A disciple of William Carlos Williams, who once called him “the best poet of your generation,” Mr. Norse found common cause with the Beats in his rejection of academic poetry and traditional metric schemes and his outsider status as a gay man.

“Harold was one of the preeminent rebel poets of our time,” the San Francisco poet NeeliCherkovski said. “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.”

Mr. Norse, born Harold Rosen, grew up poor in Brooklyn. His mother was a Lithuanian immigrant, and Harold, her only child, was the product of an affair with a German-American who had disappeared from the scene by the time his son was born. When she later married another man, Harold took the last name of his stepfather, Albam. In the early 1960s he gave up the new last name by rearranging the letters of Rosen.

At Brooklyn College, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in English literature in 1938, he edited the literary magazine and began writing poetry in an academic style. He also entered into a romantic relationship with Chester Kallman, and the two became part of W. H. Auden’s circle when Auden and Christopher Isherwood moved to New York in 1939. Kallman soon became Auden’s companion and remained so for the rest of Auden’s life.

While working toward a master’s degree in English and American poetry at New York University, Mr. Norse met Williams, who encouraged him to break with traditional verse forms and embrace a more direct, conversational language. Soon Mr. Norse was publishing in Poetry, The Saturday Review, and The Paris Review.

In 1953 he published his first collection, “The Undersea Mountain.”

Abandoning plans to earn a doctorate, he traveled through Europe and North Africa for the next 15 years. While in Italy, he began translating the sonnets of Giuseppe Giacomo Belli, written in Roman dialect.

His translations were published, with a preface by Williams, in “Roman Sonnets” (1960).


In 1968, Mr. Norse moved in with Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Corso at their seedy hotel on the Left Bank in Paris, where he used Burroughs’s technique of cutting up and reassembling sections of text at random to create the novella “Beat Hotel.”