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Reading Ken Norris's *South China Sea*

South China Sea, A Poet's Autobiography
Ken Norris,
Toronto, Guernica Editions, 2021

By Stephen Morrissey

If Ken Norris's *South China Sea* (2021) reminds me of any book, it is Leonard Cohen's *Book of Longing* (2006); both are books of poetry written when their authors were older, accomplished, and respected poets. While Cohen's book reflects on various aspects of his past from the perspective of his present life, it is not deliberately autobiographical; it is a collection of poems, drawings, and song lyrics. Norris's *South China Sea* is his autobiography; in one poem he wonders if Wordsworth's idea of "abundant recompense" applies to his life experiences; however, "the still, sad music of humanity" most accurately describes Norris's poems.

All of Ken Norris's poems in *South China Sea* are written in direct and unadorned English; this is an achievement, it is more difficult than most people realize. Sometimes these poems are nostalgic, sometimes these poems are self-deprecating, sometimes they are self-aware and insightful; and sometimes Norris presents a dark vision of life. All of Norris's poems in this book are authentic expressions of psyche which is part of the beauty and accomplishment of the book; it is this aspect of *South China Sea* that I will concentrate on.

South China Sea is autobiographical in the way that C.G. Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1962) is autobiographical, both are "partially autobiographical". Norris's poems recount events of his life and some of these events may seem minor but all assume significance when put in a poem. This is not a traditional autobiography, it is not a travel diary, it is not anecdotes of well-known poets Norris has met or known; there is some mention of a few significant family members, and friends, and acquaintances that were a part of his life; but the depth of the book is found in the layers of inner experiences that reveal the man who has lived this journey. Just as "Tintern Abbey" is Wordsworth's autobiography, at least in a spiritual sense,

this is Norris's impressionistic and subjective autobiography, an autobiography of the soul and the perceptions and experiences of the soul; they are poems about his journey in life. Norris writes,

I hear the roosters
beyond the city limits
and know that dawn has arrived.
A faint light peeking through the curtains.

Sleepless, awake since five,
I can't make any sense of my life.
The train wreck of dreams behind me.

(92)

All poets want to communicate. Writing poems is to create a bond with the reader, it may even seem to end the poet's exile or feelings of alienation. What keeps poets writing is the need, sometimes obsessive and always relentless, to get what they have to say perfectly and exactly expressed. Most poets have only a few things to say, only a few themes, but they keep returning to these few things, in book after book, over a lifetime; this is what Ken Norris has done. And if this succeeds then it should communicate to the reader, it might achieve communion between the poet and the reader and, coincidentally, it creates a communion, an understanding, for the poet and his unresolved inner self.

When anything is done in apparent excess there must be something more going on than what appears on the surface. William Blake famously wrote, "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." Norris's travels to different, often exotic, countries are not ten day all-included vacation packages, they are more adventurous and long term than that; Norris is no average tourist, it is also inner journey that he is on; he writes,

Sometimes I went:
off to Asia, down to the Keyes
and Caribbean, over to Europe
for the pleasure of a song.
Anything to get out of
dumb, anesthetized America
where the ether had taken hold,
and everyone was a patient without insurance.

(59)

There is an ironic aspect to this, travel can be both an escape from the self and a discovery of the self; in either event, the self one wanted to escape is usually waiting at the airport to welcome you home. Exile is imposed on some poets, for instance Dante's exile, but there is also exile from one's inner self, one's substantial self. Think of the meaning and context of the artist's exile as it is discussed in Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* (1956); the title gives something of Wilson's idea of the artists' position in relation to society; he or she may be in society but not of society. Norris writes, "I was always the wanderer/ the exile, sad Ishmael." (37) Robin Skelton writes, "We are all exiles seeking our unknown origins." Robin Blaser described Louis Dudek as a "walking loneliness", someone who was isolated in his own consciousness, someone not at ease with the common discourse of most people. For health reasons D.H. Lawrence escaped Britain's inclement weather but he also wanted to escape "the bitch goddess success" and the British class system, and much of his life was spent in travelling, in exile, moving from place to place; Norris writes, "I was an exile/ from America, desperately trying/ to find a home." (33)

Romantic relationships recounted in Norris's other books need to be mentioned, they are a consistent presence in this book. For some, romance can be an escape from one's self, from feeling alienated or in exile. Some of the time these relationships may be genuine communion with another person and sometimes they are an obsessive repetition of choosing the wrong person.

Now, let's consider a Dantesque experience of seeing an expression of the feminine, a Muse figure, in a young woman who happened to cross Norris's path, and how this transformed the young Norris into a poet; although he couldn't have known it at the time, it was a life changing experience, it was when he crossed the threshold into adulthood; Norris writes,

Fifteen years old.
Reading James Bond novels
and listening to *Revolver*.

I saw her
walking down the street
barefoot
and that was it for me.

Introduction to the muse.

I started writing love poems
in a blue-lined
composition notebook.

The poems were awful,
and being love-struck
and tongue-tied like that
was even worse.

(168)

In this Norris has his own teenage experience of the positive feminine; it is also his introduction to writing poetry. After this, everything else follows: travel, exile, romantic relationships, poet friends, and writing poetry. Like all good travellers, Norris has reduced his life to essentials; the three pillars of Norris's autobiography might be travel, the feminine, and writing poetry. Discovering the feminine is both his awakening and his downfall; it is the leaving behind of childhood consciousness and the birth of being a separate person with desires and needs that may or may not be satisfied; he writes,

There's no doubt that I ran
that I was constantly running away.
To Canada, to exotic islands
where the air breathed spice,
to foreign cities that contained
a thousand unimagined mysteries.

Yes, I travelled,
while everyone else
stayed home.

(60)

One of Ken Norris's biggest supporters was Louis Dudek. Dudek always rejected autobiography; he felt that whatever he was willing to say about his life was revealed in his poems, as Susan Stromberg-Stein has written about in *Louis Dudek: A Biographical Introduction* (1983). Dudek said that fame is just a way for strangers to pester you, but fame is seductive and our society is built on a foundation of desiring fame and fortune. As a social conservative at a time when so many were "doing their own thing", or what Matthew Arnold termed "doing as one

likes", Dudek was critical and felt apart from and critical of contemporary society, but compounding this were the poems he was writing, poems that most critics didn't like; I refer to *Continuation* (1981, 1997). Exile and old age can be lonely; in Dudek's old age he would ask if you were free to have coffee with him, usually at the Alexis Nihon Plaza, within walking distance of his home. I regret I ignored these invitations. What was Dudek's religion? Agreeing with Matthew Arnold, Dudek said his religion is poetry; Arnold wrote, in "The Study of Poetry", that "what passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry." Dudek knew that a poet's redemption is in poetry, redemption is in communion and poetry is the source of a poet's communion, but it is also the integrating source of the poet's existence. Norris writes,

I live like a shadow.
I keep my essence concealed.
No one knows the complete me.
I have friends for all occasions,
but none of them can calculate the complex angles.

In truth, I'm addicted to anonymity.
I write my books from the depths of my secret life
and hold them back till the self that wrote them
has evaporated and changed into someone else.

I'm never happier than when I'm faceless and nameless
in an obscure hotel in a country
no one's ever heard of,
in a place where no one I know has ever been.

(90)

And then, a few pages later, Norris writes,

Thoughts of Louis, his Atlantis,
and where exactly do I find Taishan?
I'll find out, consult a map,

and go there.
If it still exists.

(93)

I am not a traveller, I prefer the comforts of home over airports, foreign cities, and the loss of belief in my own existence I suffer after a day of site-seeing; I can take only so much

wandering around as a tourist before I want to return home. This is some kind of purgatory Norris has visited on us, "As if life were/ an hour in a bus station.// Waiting for the bus to depart/ to that better destination." (129) But it's not an hour, it's a lifetime of "waiting for Godot", and it is not mere site-seeing, it is being driven by a need to travel. The journey is universal; it is Gilgamesh's journey, it is Odysseus's journey. It is also an American archetype; it is Whitman's open road, Kerouac's on the road, and others. But it isn't Henry David Thoreau's way, he was no traveller and never went far from Concord; Thoreau observed, "I have travelled a good deal in Concord; and everywhere, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways." Thoreau's observation that Americans, and others, live lives of "quiet desperation" still describes contemporary life over 170 years since *Walden* was written. We are all seekers for truth, for meaning in life, and for Thoreau staying in the same place was an opportunity for introspection and simplifying one's life, but Norris finds the inner life in travel.

Where can we find communion with something that ends our sense of isolation? Is it found in Atlantis, that mythical place in Dudek's poetry? Or is redemption in Taishan which Norris mentions? When Norris mentions Taishan he reminds us of Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*; after World War II Pound was incarcerated in Pisa, for treason, and associated a hill he could see on the Pisan landscape with Mt. Taishan, a mountain which has spiritual importance in China. This association gave Pound hope at the time of his deepest despair; it also reminded him of the feminine and redemption by the feminine. Norris's allusion to Pound's *Pisan Cantos*, one that would have been familiar to Louis Dudek who was a friend of Ezra Pound, deepens our understanding of *South China Sea* and helps tie together three aspects of Norris's writing: travel, the feminine, and writing poetry. Most of us will never be travellers to the extent that Ken Norris has travelled but we are all on this journey to find meaning and purpose in life. This is the inner journey, in search of individuation, and it is the journey described in Ken Norris's *South China Sea*.

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