

Obituary: T. Carmi

Tudor Parfitt

Carmi Charney (T. Carmi), poet, editor, translator: born New York 31 December 1925; died Jerusalem 21 November 1994

T. Carmi made Hebrew poetry's 3,000-year unbroken tradition his own and throughout his work there is constant play between ancient and modern, writes Tudor Parfitt. Carmi loved the spoken Hebrew of modern Israel as much as the more formal Hebrew of the great post-biblical and medieval poets whom he knew so well. In the past 30 years he wrote the most consummate Hebrew love poetry, which has only been surpassed by Saul Tchernikhovsky (1875-1943), who wrote wonderful poems for a series of girls not one of whom could understand Hebrew.

Carmi was brought up in an Orthodox Jewish family in New York, and his father had adopted what was at the time the somewhat eccentric practice of insisting that the recently revived Hebrew language be spoken at home. Carmi thus learned Hebrew before English.

In his poetry he took pleasure in ironically juxtaposing ancient Hebrew words and phrases of clear religious resonance with contemporary elements rooted in the secular and often in the erotic.

Many of his poems have superscriptions taken from the Zohar or Midrash where the passages take on a sense of frightening immediacy. In one of his poems a love scene set in the modern world is couched in the language of a prayer for the Day of Atonement, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar.

Carmi was a poet's poet. His poetry is personal, not often on big national themes, ironic, rarely lyrical, and detached. It has a great deal in common with much modern Anglo-American poetry and perhaps for this reason lends itself to translation. Dom Moraes, Stephen Mitchell (in the fine Penguin Modern European Poets series) and Grace Schulman among others have translated him, often with remarkable success.

In Israel he was awarded the Shlonsky Prize for Poetry, the Brenner Prize, the particularly prestigious Bialik Prize and the Prime Minister's Prize for Creative Writing.

After two years in the Israel Defence Forces during the country's conflict with surrounding Arab states in 1948-50, Carmi studied at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem where he started to involve himself in the literary life of the new state. He was editor of the literary supplement *Massa* (1951-54), children's book editor of Israel's most important publishing house (1963-71) and from 1972 to 1974 editor of the prestigious arts review *Ariel*.

His first collection of poetry, *Blemish and Blame* (1951), drew on his experiences on the Jerusalem front during the war. His second work, *There are No Black Flowers* (1953), a series of dramatic dialogues, was based on his

harrowing time working in an orphanage in France for concentration-camp survivors.

His fine collection *The Brass Serpent* (1964) included some of his most famous poems and displayed the economy of style which was to characterise his subsequent work. Carmi's verse was included in *Somebody Like You* (1964), *The Last Sea* (1966), *The Unicorn Looks in the Mirror* (1967) *The Claim* (1967) *Selected Poems 1951-1969* (1970), *Author's Apology* (1974), *Into Another Land* (1977), *At The Stone of Losses* (1981), *Half My Desire* (1984), *One to Me* (1985), *Monologues and Other Poems* (1988), and *Truth and Cons equence* (1993).

Without doubt Carmi's scholarly magnum opus was *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* which contains 600 pages of commentary and poems - many of which had never before been recognised as such. He was widely viewed as an authority on Hebrew poetry. He went as

Visiting Professor to Brandeis University in 1970, to the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies in 1974-76, and from that time until his death had a position at the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem.

His translations from various languages into Hebrew include *Antigone* (1970), *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1964), *Measure for Measure* (1979), *Hamlet* (1981), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1983), *Othello* (1991), *Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1990) as well as works by Wallace Stevens, his friend Dom Moraes, John Osborne, Brecht and others. There are few if any translators into Hebrew in the 20th century who have equalled his range and the consistent excellence of his work. Had he been employed by the British Council he could hardly have done more for the export of British culture.

I first got to know Carmi during the two years he spent in Oxford accompanied by his beautiful second wife Tamara, a gifted artist who illustrated a number of Carmi's works. We both had flats at Yarnton Manor which had just become the seat of the Oxford Hebrew Centre. Carmi was in every way an attractive man with a rare magnetism. He had time for people, conversation and ideas. He became a familiar figure in Oxford pubs and cafes where he loved to sit and write. He soon had a following of local poets and students as well as academic colleagues.

It is a curious thing that some of the most haunting Hebrew poems of recent years were written in a very English Jacobean manor house. The discovery of a dead bird on his doorstep provoked a powerful poem where he demanded the right to exist for his people, himself and his son. In the 1970s Carmi seemed to his friends to have achieved happiness. But his tranquil domestic circumstances did not serve his poetry. Separating from Tamara and marrying a much younger woman suited his poetic requirements: he took literally as well as metaphorically the dictum of Robert Graves (quoted in one of his poems) that "the muse is the eternal other woman". Marot's famous poem could provide his epitaph (and I don't think he would have been displeased): "Amour tu as t matre: je t'ai servi sur tous les dieux!"